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Malcolm MacDonald and Brunei: Diplomacy with intimacy

B.A. Hussainmiya

This article narrates the long-standing diplomatic relationship between Malcolm MacDonald and Brunei. Macdonald played a significant role in safeguarding Brunei's survival as an independent Malay Islamic sultanate during decolonisation. He prevented Brunei from becoming a British crown colony in 1946 unlike the neighbouring states of Sarawak and North Borneo. Having failed to unite the three North Borneo territories into a federation, he may have concurred with Brunei's decision to opt out of the Malaysian Federation in August 1963 and thereafter. Due to his empathy with the Brunei sultans, especially Omar Ali Saifuddin the III, MacDonald's approach for Brunei's future contradicted the vision of his contemporaries for democratising Brunei.

One of the most important and colourful British officials to influence the course of modern Brunei history was Rt. Hon. Malcolm MacDonald (1901–81), Governor-General of the British dependencies of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, North Borneo (now Sabah), and High Commissioner for the Sultanate of Brunei from 1946–1948. Subsequently he was appointed Commissioner-General for the United Kingdom in Southeast Asia and was based in Singapore from 1948–1955.[1] Even after leaving the region, he visited Brunei on several missions as a special envoy of the British government until 1979. During this long association with Brunei, he interacted with three successive rulers — Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin (r.1929–50), Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III (r. 1950–1967), and Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah (r.1967–).[2]

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1 Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the onset of the Cold War, 1945–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

2 Bob Reece, '"The Little Sultan": Ahmad Tajuddin II of Brunei, Gerard MacBryan, and Malcolm Macdonald', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 40 (2009): 81–108; B.A. Hussainmiya,

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MacDonald's diplomatic involvement with the sultans did contribute to the survival of Brunei as an independent Malay sultanate. He was following in the footsteps, on a lesser scale, of Malcolm Stewart McArthur, a previous British consul and the first Resident of Brunei (1906–08).[3] If not for the latter's advice, Brunei would have been swallowed up by the White Rajahs of Sarawak.[4] In comparison, MacDonald's role was an indirect one — in 1946 he prevented Brunei from becoming a crown colony like its neighbouring states of Sarawak and Sabah which also came under the Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1890. Moreover, when his original vision of a union of the three Borneo states could not be implemented due to reasons beyond his control, he seemed to have discreetly countenanced the Brunei sultans' intransigence in keeping out of the Malaysia Federation in August 1963 and thereafter.

This article seeks to find a common thread in the official correspondence, telegrams, memoranda, dispatches, minutes, and so on that linked MacDonald with Brunei while acknowledging the fact that there were many other factors and actors that determined the course of modern Brunei.[5] It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comparative perspective of his service in several other colonial territories.[6] Brunei was the smallest state he dealt with during decolonisation. By highlighting MacDonald's dealings in Brunei, this article seeks modestly to add to the literature on his life and career, and also as another episode in the decolonisation of the British Empire.

I have consulted the relevant Malcolm MacDonald Papers at the library of Durham University,[7] as well as the Colonial and British Commonwealth Office files. The only extant biography, by Clyde

Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin and Britain: The making of Brunei Darussalam (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995).

3 McArthur's ideas on rescuing Brunei are republished in M.S.H. McArthur, *Report on Brunei in 1904*, introduced and annotated by A.V.M. Horton (Athens: Monographs in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series no. 74, Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1987). See also B.A. Hussainmiya, *Brunei: Revival of 1906, a popular history* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Brunei Press, 2006).

4 R.H.W. Reece, *The name of Brooke: The end of White Rajah rule in Sarawak* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982); Steven Runciman, *The White Rajahs: A history of Sarawak from 1941 to 1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). See also Hussainmiya, *Brunei*.

5 See further A.J. Stockwell, 'Britain and Brunei, 1945–1963: Imperial retreat and royal ascendancy', *Modern Asian Studies* 38, 4 (2004): 785–819.

6 For instance, in Kenya, where his skill, charm, and patience helped bring about stable democratic independence in 1963. See Keith Kyle, *The politics of the independence of Kenya* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

7 Malcolm MacDonald was appointed as the Chancellor of Durham University in 1970.

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Sanger,[8] is a useful source. It is based on material in MacDonald's draft autobiography 'Constant surprise',[9] written in his mid 70s, which contains interesting revelations about the Brunei royal family. Macdonald also published two quasi-autobiographical books — *People and places: Random reminiscences of Malcolm MacDonald* (1969) and *Titans and others* (1972).[10] As a long-serving public servant and a unique figure in British decolonisation, MacDonald's career and achievements deserve far more attention by scholars, and as his would-be biographer Peter Lyon states, MacDonald's role in history has been neglected for far too long.[11]

Malcolm John MacDonald was the second son of Ramsay MacDonald, Britain's first Labour prime minister. Malcolm MacDonald became a member of parliament at the age of 27, a minister by 29, and a cabinet minister by 33.[12] Away from mainstream British politics, he became successively high commissioner, governor-general, governor, commissioner-general, high commissioner again, ambassador-extraordinary, special envoy, and held a host of other positions as well. Apart from a stint of five years in Canada as Britain's high commissioner from 1941, he spent ten years in Southeast Asia, five years in India, and six years in Africa.

8 Clyde Sanger, *Malcolm MacDonald: Bringing an end to empire* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).

9 'Constant surprise', evidently an early (probably the first) draft, MacDonald Papers, Durham University Library (henceforth 'MacDonald Papers'), MS 121/6/1-263. Some additional pages have been inserted at various points, presumably intended to be incorporated in a revision, MacDonald Papers, MS 121/20/1-597. There are various drafts of 'Constant surprise' with many alterations, repetitions and gaps. For a full list of the MacDonald Papers, see http://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ead/pol/macdon.xml (last accessed 13 June 2013).

10 Malcolm MacDonald, *People and places: Random reminiscences*, S.I. (London: Collins, 1969); Malcolm MacDonald, *Titans and others* (London: William Collins & Sons, 1972).

11 Peter Lyon came to know the ageing Macdonald well and, having reviewed Sanger's book, had planned to write another biography. Lyon was the first to see MacDonald's papers before they were officially weeded and dispatched to Durham, but died in 2010 without completing the biography itself (pers. comm. from A.J. Stockwell, June 2013). Lyon also wrote the entry on MacDonald in the *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/31/101031388; last accessed 30 July 2014) and 'Clyde on Malcolm MacDonald: The public and private lives of a British envoy', *Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 86, 341 (1997): 109–17. The late historian Mary Turnbull never completed her planned biography of MacDonald (pers. comm., 2 Feb. 2006, Langham Hotel, Auckland). Other sources include: Joe Garner, *The Commonwealth Office 1925–68* (London: Heinemann, 1978); D.J. Morgan, *The official history of colonial development*, 1924–1945 (London: Macmillan, 1980); Stephen Constantine, *The making of British colonial development policy 1914–40* (London: Cass, 1984); Anthony J. Stockwell, *British policy and Malay politics during the Malayan Union experiment 1942–1948* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1979); Anthony J. Stockwell, 'British imperial policy and decolonization in Malaya 1942–52', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 13, 1 (1984): 68–87.

12 In the 1930s he had been secretary of state for both the Dominions and the Colonies.

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MacDonald had the experience to have a unique approach to the decolonisation of British territories in Asia and Africa. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan remarked that he had 'done more for Southeast Asia than perhaps any other living person and that not only Asia but the whole Western World were indeed grateful to him'.[13] As Shridath Rampal, a former Commonwealth secretary-general puts it: 'Malcolm MacDonald's life's work was to make imperial rule a thing of yesterday. It was a measure of achievement that in 1970 he could have spoken of that period of dominion as of an era passed.'[14] As the Governor-General of Malaya and as Commissioner-General of Southeast Asia he facilitated independence for Malaya and Singapore in 1957 and in Kenya he effected transition to independence in 1963.[15] By comparison Brunei attained independence rather late, in 1984, but again MacDonald may have had a hand in the undue delay experienced by the Sultanate to reach that milestone.

Of all the places Malcolm MacDonald served as a colonial administrator, he seemed to have developed a special fondness for Malaya and British Borneo.[16] Brunei, with a long history of monarchic rule and dubbed as 'the Mother State of Borneo'[17] also held strong personal appeal. Even after leaving office in 1955, he visited or passed through Brunei on a number of occasions, and was always a welcome visitor at the Brunei Palace until he passed away in January 1981.

Early visits to Brunei and Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin

With victory for the Allies in sight in 1944, Churchill's wartime cabinet was making plans for the future of Malaya and the British Borneo territories, i.e. to unite them and quit later.[18] Malcolm MacDonald's appointment

13 Sanger, *Malcolm MacDonald*, p. 376.

14 Ibid., p. 439.

15 Donald C. Savage, 'Jomo Kenyatta, Malcolm MacDonald and the Colonial Office 1938–39: Some documents from the P.R.O.', *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 3, 3 (1969): 615–32.

16 He was especially fond of the indigenous people of Borneo such as Ibans, Kayans, and Kenyahs and remarked jocularly: 'I liked the wild men of Borneo a great deal, no doubt, I am a bit [of a] wild man myself, simply in habits and under developed in my intellectual capabilities.' 'Constant surprise', p. 325, MS 121/6/1-263, MacDonald Papers.

17 The description of Brunei as 'the Mother State of Borneo' was repeated by Sir John Martin at a Colonial Office meeting with H.H. the Sultan of Brunei in 1957. Note of a meeting with H.H. the Sultan of Brunei, 11 Sept. 1957, the United Kingdom National Archives, Colonial Office (CO) 1030/460.

18 Nicholas Tarling, 'Sir Cecil Clementi and the Federation of British Borneo', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)* 44, 2 (1971): 1–34. Cecil Clementi became Governor of the Straits Settlements (including Labuan), High Commissioner for the Malay States and for Brunei, and British Agent for Sarawak and North Borneo.

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in Southeast Asia immediately after the collapse of the Malayan Union proposal[19] was due partly to local Malay resistance to the surrender of the Sultans' powers to the British Crown. Concerned about similar sentiments arising in Brunei, he cautioned his government not to meddle in Brunei's internal affairs.

The Brunei question had been on the minds of its administrators for some time. In 1931, Cecil Clementi had campaigned for a federation comprising Labuan, Brunei, Sarawak and North Borneo.[20] Similarly in 1940, another Colonial Office mandarin, J.M. Martin, made a similar proposal for a Borneo federation — ideally by returning Sarawak and Sabah to the fold of Brunei — which would then become a focus of a self-governing Borneo. The stumbling block, if any, was HRH Ahmad Tajuddin, considered a weak Brunei sultan and 'hardly an asset' who could not be entrusted with such far-reaching changes.[21] The idea was revived again in 1944 by C.F.C. Macaskie (formerly in colonial service in North Borneo and the Head of the Borneo-Planning Unit in 1945–46) who suggested restoring to Brunei its former districts, including the Fifth Division, before creating a unified Borneo administration.[22]

Brunei, despite its size, was a trump card for any federation proposals. For Brunei's new found wealth (since the discovery of oil in 1929) was considered essential to rebuild a larger North Borneo state as 'a compact territorial unit with a well-balanced economy'. While advising the preservation of Brunei as a sovereign state, MacDonald backed the proposal for a loose federation, which was more or less a blueprint for a three states-one-country solution. As the deadline for the restoration of civilian government in Brunei approached on 1 July 1946, MacDonald urged the Colonial Office not to link Brunei with either the North Borneo or Sarawak administrations. The envisaged revision of the British–Brunei Treaty of 1906 was undesirable 'since this might tend to arouse an opposition to our proposals and perhaps defeat our proposals altogether [to bring Brunei into a larger Malaya–Borneo Federation]'.[23] He advised against bringing Brunei under the authority of King George or administering

19 See Albert Lau, *Malayan Union controversy: 1942–1948* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991); Stockwell, *British policy and Malayan politics*. MacDonald had supported the governor of the Malayan Union Edward Gent's call to abandon the scheme. Karl Hack, *Defence and decolonisation in Southeast Asia 1941–1960* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 15.

20 Tarling, 'Sir Cecil Clementi'.

21 J.M. Martin, Memorandum, 14 Feb. 1940, CO 531/29 (File 17).

22 Macaskie to Wodeman, (Secret) Memorandum, 4 Dec. 1944, CO 825/42, File 55104/3/1943–44, Item 37. See also Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin and Britain,* ch. 8.

23 Telegram, Secret, Governor General to Colonial Office, 16 May 1947, Item 5, and

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Brunei under the Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1890 and instead promoted a scheme whereby Brunei 'would be joined for administrative and any other necessary purposes with a neighbouring colony, without any derogation in theory from the former's (Brunei) present Constitutional position'.[24] Brunei was placed under the Governor of the British Colony of Sarawak, who became the ex-officio High-Commissioner for Brunei, an arrangement that came into effect from 1 May 1948.

MacDonald as the colonial secretary in 1940 was already familiar with Brunei matters when he sanctioned Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin's formal coronation (*berpuspa)* allegedly delayed by J.G. Black, the British Resident.[25] Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin's character and upbringing are highlighted in MacDonald's writings, which have been described as 'scurrilous' by historian Robert Reece.[26] Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin, Brunei's twenty-seventh monarch, remains an almost forgotten yet maligned figure in Brunei history[27] despite the fact that he pressed for greater political and financial independence for the Sultanate in a way that was ahead of his time.[28]

MacDonald's maiden visit to Brunei on 15 July 1946[29] took place in his positions as the Governor-General of Malaya and High Commissioner to Brunei as it was still administered as part of British Malaya. The trip

Telegram, Secret, Governor General to Colonial Office, 23 Oct. 1947, Item 14, para 2, CO 537/2244.

24 Secret, Governor-General to Colonial Office, 16 May 1947, CO 537/2244, Item 5.

25 Minute by Shenton Thomas to R. Irvine, 27 May 1938 and J.G. Black to R. Irvine, Secretary to High Commissioner for the Malay States, Confidential, 10 May 1938. Item 6, para 4. Brunei Archives (BA) 12010/1978 Setia Usaha Kerajaan (SUK Series, Box 4) (Previously BRO No. 25/1938). See further B.A. Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin and Britain*, ch. 2.

26 Reece, 'The Little Sultan'. See further MacDonald Papers, MS 79/8/15-21.

27 Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin (born on 2 Sept. 1913) was the eldest son of Sultan Muhammad Jamalul Alam (r.1906–24). He ascended the throne in 1924 at a tender age of eleven, after his father died of malaria. A minor until 1931, he served under a regency run by his uncles, Pengiran Bendahara Pengiran Anak Abdul Rahman and Pengiran Pemancha Pengiran Anak Muhammad Yassin together with his mother, Paduka Sri Isteri Pengiran Anak Fatimah. In 1934 the Sultan married Tengku Rohani alias Roihani, daughter of the Sultan of Selangor Aliuddin Sulaiman Shah. Given the change in fortunes witnessed by the Sultanate in the 1930s, perhaps it was inevitable that the British administration would face a direct challenge from the Sultan with respect to sharing the country's wealth. The Sultan harboured many grouses against the British administration. Since the inception of the residency, only junior officers had been appointed to serve as resident-advisor to the Sultan. The Sultan was incensed by the British residents, who not only admonished him, but also complained to the Colonial Office about his failings. See Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin and Britain*, ch. 2. Also for a brief study of the Sultan in Malay, see Haji Muhaimin Haji Mohamed, *Pemerintahan Sultan Ahman Tajuddin 1924–1950: Kerajaan, mesyarakat dan perubahan* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Pusat Sejarah Brunei, 2011).

28 Reece, 'The Little Sultan', pp. 82–4.

29 Coincidentally, this was on the day current Sultan H.M. Haji Hassanal Bolkiah was born.

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made him aware of the nationalist undercurrents in the Sultanate. Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin and his followers used the occasion to impress upon the visiting dignitary that he should redress the grievances of the local Malays. On the second day of the visit he received a grand welcome from several local organisations: Barisan Pemuda (BARIP; Youth Association), Brunei Malay Association, Chinese Association, and Indian Association. BARIP, whose members were the most nationalistic of all, erected an arch in Brunei Town with the slogan 'Restorer of Peace and Justice'; placed next to the Union Jack was a flag with another slogan, 'The sole right of the Sultan and the Subjects'. This irritated the Resident who thought it subversive and ordered it to be removed, but BARIP stood its ground, possibly with the backing of the Sultan himself.[30]

On a visit in July 1947 MacDonald had to convince Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin that the proposed Sarawak–Brunei merger involved administrative changes only and that Brunei would not be part of the Crown Colony of Sarawak. Next, MacDonald visited Brunei as the United Kingdom's Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, for the silver jubilee celebrations of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin's accession to the throne on 22 September 1949, but a small hiccup in protocol nearly marred the occasion.[31] Again the Sultan tried to drive home the message of long-felt grievances to MacDonald by trying to keep away from the main function. Sulking from the delay in completing the new palace in Brunei Town, the Sultan — then domiciled in Sarawak's capital Kuching — refused at first to attend the function in his own honour. Sarawak's Malay leader Abang Haji Mustapha finally persuaded the Sultan to attend lest he insulted MacDonald. In his speech, MacDonald expressed sympathy for the Sultan's cause and assured him that his new palace would soon be completed (see Illustration 1).

An entry in MacDonald's diary says 'without him [Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin] on this auspicious occasion the ceremonies in his state would indeed be a performance of "Hamlet" without the Prince of Denmark!'[32] The Sultan received a knighthood from King George VI on this occasion and he used courtly phrases and made sly, ingratiating, and flattering remarks about the Commissioner, who wrote that the Sultan behaved

30 The Sultan's participation in BARIP's first anniversary on 12 Apr. 1947 and the hoisting of the BARIP flag at the Malay school in Jalan Pemancha, Bandar Brunei, raised many questions. See Mohd. Jamil al Sufri (Pehin), *Liku-liku perjuangan, pencapaian kemerdekaan Negara Brunei Darussalam* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Pusat Sejarah Brunei, 1992), ch. 1 and 2.
31 Brunei: Visit of Malcolm MacDonald (Commissioner-General for the UK in South East Asia) and others to Brunei on occasion of HH The Sultan's Silver Jubilee, Sept. 1949, 1 Jan.–31 Dec. 1949. FCO 141/1558.
32 On Sultan's Silver Jubilee, ch. 15, MS, MacDonald Papers, 37/6/1.

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Illustration 1. Malcolm MacDonald delivering his felicitations at the Silver Jubilee celebrations for Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin, September 1949. All photographs reproduced by permission of the Brunei History Centre, Bandar Seri Bagawan.

with 'high diplomatic nicety with his artful quality whose utterances occasionally showed a pretty turn of humour'.[33]

The last meeting between MacDonald and Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin took place at Bukit Serene, the commissioner-general's residence in Singapore when the latter was in transit to England to revise the terms of the Brunei–British Agreement and oil royalty matters. The English film director Carol Reed was also at the luncheon. MacDonald suggested to Reed to consider filming Joseph Conrad's novel *Outcast of the islands* in Brunei, but must also have ingratiated himself by suggesting that Reed make a film about the life of the Sultan, who was a cinephile.[34] Reed, in fact, returned to meet the Sultan to discuss the details of the proposed film at his suite in the Raffles Hotel in Singapore some 24 hours later on 4 June 1950, but the Sultan had just passed away. MacDonald expressed his condolences to his Malaysian consort, Tengku Rohani: 'I was very fond of His Highness the Sultan. He was one of the most colourful

33 On Sultan of Brunei, ch. 16, MS, MacDonald Papers, 37/6/62.

34 The first cinema in Brunei Town was named after Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin; in 1953 the Brunei People's Party launched its nationalist struggle by forming a film company called 'Brufico'. Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin and Britain*, pp. 101–4.

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personages whom I have ever met and we had many interesting times together. I shall always remember his lively personality on future visits to Borneo.'[35]

Immediately thereafter, MacDonald had to directly intervene in the succession issue to the Brunei throne. As the late Sultan did not leave a male heir, on 5 June 1950 his younger brother the Duli Pengiran Bendahara Pengiran Muda Tengah was declared with MacDonald's full blessings as the new Sultan, HRH Omar Ali Saifuddin III, a decision ratified by the special State Council meeting represented by key Bruneian dignitaries, British Resident Eric Pretty, and High Commissioner Anthony Abell. As early as July 1947, it was MacDonald who had prevailed upon a reluctant Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin to appoint the new Pengiran Mudah Tengah (later Omar Ali Saifuddin III) as the Duli Pengiran Bendahara, a position that had fallen vacant since the old Pengiran Bendahara Pengiran Anak Abdul Rahman died in 1943.[36] The appointment of the Kuala Kangsar (Malaya)-educated Pengiran Tengah to the post of first *wazir* (first minister), made him an heir apparent by elevating his status to that of the most senior member of Brunei's political hierarchy.

Succession to the Brunei throne did not pose any serious problems for the British administration, with the exception of Gerard MacBryan's claim that he was authorised by the late Sultan to look after his interests. However, his clever ploy in trying to become a virtual 'White Rajah' of Brunei by grafting himself into the royal family was nipped in the bud. Gerard Truman Magill MacBryan (1901–53) was a Scotsman whose meteoric appearance and interference in the affairs of both Sarawak and Brunei merits special attention.[37] By early 1950, MacBryan had convinced Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin to appoint him as political adviser on foreign affairs and to help him pursue the Sultan's constitutional and financial rights in London. The Sultan, before passing away, was said to have authorised MacBryan to look after his interests.

35 Commissioner-General for the UK in South East Asia to British Resident, Brunei, Telegram No. 14, 5 June 1950, MS, MacDonald Papers 19/11/13–15.

36 Minutes of the Brunei State Council Minutes, 7 Aug. 1947, BA FC/RBM/57; Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin and Britain*, p. 59.

37 MacBryan's career began with a decade in the Straits Civil Service (1920–30). In the late 1920s, he was the private secretary to Rajah Vyner Brooke, but was thereafter banned from Sarawak for almost a decade for misdemeanours. In 1940, however, he became the temporary curator of the Sarawak Museum and was later reappointed as Brooke's private secretary. MacBryan played a role in the prelude to Sarawak's cession to the British Crown in 1945–46. He then moved to Johannesburg in South Africa, but later returned to Sarawak and Brunei in 1949–50. He became a confidante of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin (whom he had earlier befriended in Kuching through Inche Hassan bin Kulap Mohamed, the Sultan's private secretary). See Reece, 'The Little Sultan', pp. 82–8.

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According to the dispatches, MacBryan was to proceed to the United States as the Sultan's 'chosen and personal and political representative' and negotiate an agreement with the President of Standard Oil for the full development of Brunei's oilfields. MacBryan was investigating the American connection as early as 1941 when he first approached the US consul in Singapore. He did make contact with Standard Oil by mid-1950. Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin had also instructed MacBryan to inform the United States of America of the injustices that Brunei had suffered from 'enforced treaties' with Britain and inform the authorities that 'my daughter has equal rights with the daughter of the King of England to succeed to a throne'.[38]

MacDonald sternly handled the MacBryan fiasco since the latter's actions seemed legitimate and convincing on the surface. However, MacDonald convinced London that MacBryan was but a conman and madman.[39] For MacDonald, Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin was the best choice for Brunei and for cementing a cordial relationship between his country and Britain. MacDonald's succinct speech at the new Brunei Sultan's coronation in praise of Sultan Omar summed up the importance of the Brunei monarchy and the British–Brunei relations (see Appendix 1).[40]

Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III

MacDonald's support for the new Sultan was also pragmatic as the latter had collaborated on the preliminary schemes which the British had designed, not only for Brunei's political future, but also the future of its neighbours — Sabah and Sarawak. The first was the Sarawak–Brunei administrative merger in 1948, which as the then Pengiran Bendahara, Omar Ali had seemingly endorsed by touring the state in the company of Resident L.N. Davis to pacify local opinion.[41]

The Brunei–Sarawak administration itself, under which the Sarawak British officers, including the resident, were seconded to serve in Brunei, soon turned out to be a thorny issue in Brunei–British negotiations as it caused much resentment among the locals, who loathed being subject to

38 Correspondence related to this episode was forwarded to the United States State Department. Sydney B. Redecker, American Consul General (Johannesburg) to the U.S. Department of State, No. 297, 25 Apr. 1951, ANA/RG 59/746H.00/4-255, U.S. National Archives, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

39 Brunei High Commissioner to Colonial Office, No. 35, 15 June 1950 and the UK Commissioner General in S.E. Asia to the Secretary of State, Confidential Telegram, No. 141, 10 June 1950, CO 943/2 (59726).

40 Speech by His Excellency Right Honourable Mr. Malcolm MacDonald, May 1951, Appendix 1. CO 943/2 (59726), Item 34.

41 Memorandum by L.H.N. Davis, 'Tour of Brunei to announce the administrative change', 9 Mar. 1948, para 2, CO 943/1(59706).

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power emanating from Sarawak, a country which their forefathers had ruled.[42] Why did the then Pengiran Muda Tengah, after ascending the Brunei throne, later turn against the merger arrangement? Historians may argue that this was but typical of the survival instincts of Brunei rulers when pitted against a major imperial power. This theme surfaces in the writing of Ranjit Singh[43] and my book *Brunei: The revival of 1906*.[44] Being a tiny country set on weakened foundations, the Brunei sultans had to recourse to such tactics as evasion and prevarication when dealing with a larger power.

How earnest was MacDonald towards Brunei and his good friend Sultan Omar? Did MacDonald place Brunei's interests above colonial policies? A reading of the British Colonial Office records may not directly shed light on such issues. Perhaps one needs to read between the lines, and to consider the psychology of the personalities involved.

An early manifestation of Sultan Omar's assertiveness came to light just one year after he ascended the throne. The Sultan made a gaffe that acutely embarrassed his mentor MacDonald, who instantly stepped in to defuse the diplomatic imbroglio. During an interview with the Singapore *Straits Times*, the new Sultan broke a taboo by renewing Brunei's claim to Limbang and to Labuan Island. This spread shock waves among the authorities in Sarawak and British North Borneo. Later the story was changed under the initiative of MacDonald himself to absolve the Sultan of culpability and save him from imperial censure. Although the reporter insisted that he had accurately reported what the Sultan had said, the Sultan's private secretary, Inche Ibrahim Jahfar, blamed himself and said that it was he, not the Sultan, who had discussed the Limbang and Labuan issue. Ibrahim Jahfar insisted that even so, he had only repeated the well-known history of how those lands were lost to Brunei. MacDonald had to convince the Governor of Sarawak in a lengthy telegram that it had all been a mistake — for surely the Sultan would have said no such thing without first discussing the matter with MacDonald, and the issue had never been raised between them.[45]

42 One of the young firebrand Bruneians, Mohammed Jamil al Sufri (who later became Ydm Pehin, a respected Brunei historian), who was at the time in his late twenties, is said to have openly questioned the British Resident during one of the explanatory sessions and enquired as to how the British could carry out this merger against the wishes of the Brunei people.

43 D.S. Ranjit Singh, *Brunei, 1839–1983: The problems of political survival* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991).

44 Hussainmiya, *Brunei*.

45 UK Commissioner General in Southeast to Governor Sarawak, Telegram No. 245, 24 Sept. 1951, CO 943/2 (59726).

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At any rate this incident demonstrated Sultan Omar's persistent sense of grievance, felt by all his countryfolk alike, about the unjust loss of Brunei territories like Limbang to the Brooke regime in 1890 and Labuan Island to the British Crown in 1847. Sultan Omar never seemed to abandon the claim to Limbang, once the rice-bowl of Brunei, and kept on bringing up the issue through British diplomatic channels, even openly clashing with Sarawak's authorities.

North Borneo Federation proposals

Once Sultan Omar was in power, MacDonald had to deal with him with great circumspection in order to promote his pet project of a federation of the three North Borneo British territories. This was in keeping with the Imperial government's desire to form a federal system here, as elsewhere in Asia, Africa, the West Indies, and the Trucial States in the Middle-East. Forming a North Borneo federation, however, was difficult given the conflicting interests of the leaders of the three states, with the biggest stumbling block none other than MacDonald's protégé Sultan Omar himself. Although the scheme never took off, except in a different form with the Federation of Malaysia in August 1963 (sans Brunei), MacDonald continued to regret, if not feel remorse for, the failure of his original proposal.

British policy was designed to promote close cooperation among its dependencies in Southeast Asia with Singapore as a fulcrum. Collaboration between the territories gathered momentum especially after the creation in 1948 of the Singapore-based post of a Commissioner-General for the United Kingdom in Southeast Asia, replacing the earlier Governor-General (Malaya), whose main function was to promote and coordinate policy and administration between the governments under his authority.[46] This involved the 'organisation of defence, the development of sea and air communications, [and] planning to ensure that the more backward parts of the territories share equally in the programmes for social, economic and political advancement…'. He was also to seek 'closer political cooperation between the territories and to advise the Secretary of State for Colonies from time to time'.[47]

The first commissioner-general, Malcolm MacDonald, plunged into his role with missionary zeal. In keeping with the new colonial policy, he marshalled the efforts of the Borneo governors to promote the long-term aim of a 'self-governing Dominion of all these territories (the Federation of

46 Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the onset of the Cold War*, p. 47.

47 Secretary of State for Colonies to Governor General, 12 Nov. 1949. Reported in *Straits Times*, 28 Nov. 1949. MacDonald's views on his ultimate mission to form a Greater Malaysia Federation are documented also in: Malcolm MacDonald to Secretary of State, Confidential, No. 6, 24 Nov. 1948, Item 1, para 5, BA 0132/83 (SUK Series 4, Box 11).

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Malaya, the colonies of Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo and the protectorate of Brunei) within the Commonwealth'.[48] He also made a measured public pronouncement that 'whether this can develop into a political federation of Borneo territories, leading ultimately to the creation with Malaya, of a Southeast Asian Dominion Government, is another matter, but Bornean federation is both logical and achievable in the not distant future'.[49] The commissioner-general was in a better position to promote that aim, because he also held the positions of chairman of the Joint Cooperation Committee between Singapore and the Federation of Malaya and chairman of the Borneo Governors' Conference. No doubt, as Simandjuntak has pointed out, during his tenure in office MacDonald was largely responsible for having 'aroused in the Borneo territories a consciousness of their common destiny'.[50]

MacDonald proposed three principal methods to facilitate these objectives: by establishing joint departments, by regular consultative meetings or conferences between government officers and officials and by exchanges of officers between the territories. The conference stimulated much speculation in outside circles. For instance, the *Straits Budget* of 30 April 1953 perceptively remarked that 'it is possible to see in this conference the embryo of a Federation'. A sensitive Sultan Omar quickly issued a statement denying any such suggestion at the Kuching Conference.[51] The officials dared not contradict the Sultan, for the Colonial Office had forewarned the conference promoters to respect Brunei's sensitivities. Taking note of MacDonald's proposition that 'some sort of Confederation' is envisaged for all the British territories in Southeast Asia, the Secretary of State insisted that the closer association of the three Borneo territories should precede considerations of any plan for a wider association between those territories and the Federation of Malaya and Singapore.[52] Even so the commissioner-general was advised 'to proceed slowly in these matters and to give the Brunei Government ample time to settle down'. After all, 'there could be no question of a Federation of the Borneo territories being imposed on the people of Brunei from without'.[53]

48 The UK Commissioner-General in S.E. Asia to Colonial Office, 10 June 1952, CO 1022/63.

49 *Straits Times*, 24 Apr. 1953.

50 B. Simandjuntak, *Malayan federalism, 1945–1963: A study of federal problems in a plural society* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 119.

51 *Sunday Mail*, 18 May 1953.

52 Secret, No. 77, Alan Lennox Boyd (The Secretary of State for Colonies) to the Commissioner-General for the UK in S.E. Asia, 25 Mar. 1955, para 2, CO 1030/164.

53 J.O. Gilbert to H.H. the Sultan of Brunei, 13 Aug. 1955, BA 0475/83 (SUK Series 4, Box 27), Annex in Item 46.

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There were many reasons why the Federation proposals failed. The Sarawak–Brunei administrative union of 1948 was blamed for blighting all subsequent efforts by the British to bring Brunei into any federal plan with the dependent British–Borneo territories. Brunei could not be coerced to join a federation which the Sultan perceived was going to undermine its sovereign status and fritter away its newly found wealth on less fortunate neighbours. In short, without the 'oil sultanate', there would be no Borneo Federation. By pooling resources, particularly human resources, Sarawak and North Borneo offered to develop Brunei administratively; in return, Brunei was expected to share its wealth for the 'physical' development of the territories. However, since Brunei jealously guarded its wealth, the British avoided mentioning the subject in their public pronouncements.

Despite feverish diplomatic initiatives, MacDonald's personal efforts never paid off. His status as only a coordinator without any executive powers in Southeast Asia earned him a nickname, 'the waffler'.[54] In MacDonald's own words, 'the campaign in favour of a federation failed because the necessary conditions for its success did not and do not exist in British Borneo'.[55] A shift in British thinking regarding the larger Federation idea was discernible after his term of office as commissioner-general and when his successor Robert Scott took over 'as he could not proceed with the three Borneo federation idea [sic] as London discouraged them [the new policy makers]'.[56] The massive Alliance party victory in 1955 and sudden prospects of Malaya racing towards independence sent the idea into cold storage for the 'disparate territories of British Borneo' as Nicholas Tarling describes.[57] A new British concern surfaced that 'the threat of being eaten up by Malaya will seem to the Borneo territories even greater'.[58]

MacDonald had received a warm welcome during his official and unofficial visits to Brunei (Illustration 2). He became a special guest of the Sultan of Brunei on important state occasions. For example, in 1954 he was invited to royal functions in the palace — Istana Darul Hana — to grace the Khatna (circumcision) ceremonies of Princes Hassanal and Mohammed, the two elder sons of Sultan Omar and the ear-piercing ceremony of his elder daughter Princess Masna respectively (Illustration 3).

54 Hack, *Defence and decolonisation in Southeast Asia,* p. 15.
55 'Constant surprise', p. 345, MacDonald Papers 121/6/1-263.
56 Ibid., p. 338.
57 Tarling, 'Sir Cecil Clementi and the Federation of British Borneo', p. 33.
58 Minute by Ian Watt, 5 June 1956, CO 1030/164.

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Illustration 2. Malcolm MacDonald and Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin in conversation, 1955.

Despite the welcome, the Sultan's aversion to the North Borneo Federation proposals made him spurn MacDonald's request during the visit for a loan as financial relief to the State of North Borneo. Brunei had just approved a loan of 100 million dollars to the Malaysian Federation, but the same courtesy was not extended to its immediate neighbours.[59] Disappointed, the governors of Sarawak and North Borneo abandoned for the last time their long-nurtured hopes for closer cooperation with Brunei and decided to concentrate on developing closer links between each other, with the distant hope that Brunei would eventually come their way. MacDonald's grand idea was thus shelved.

In December 1958 Sultan Omar extended to him a special invitation to witness the grand opening of the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque. In deference to the British government's wishes to broach the subject of the fledgling federation, he spent several hours with the Sultan. The close bond that existed between MacDonald and Sultan Omar was demonstrated further when the Sultan took MacDonald into his private chambers to meet his consort, the Raja Isteri, who the visiting diplomat held in high

59 By 1959 the North Borneo government needed to borrow a development loan of $8 million from Brunei, which the Sultan turned down. The loan was to be raised by the North Borneo government and was underwritten by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. Minute by H.H. the Sultan of Brunei to the Private Secretary to the Sultan, 30 Dec. 1959, BA 2102/1983 (SUK Series 3, Box 165).

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Illustration 3. Malcolm Macdonald is seen (2nd to the right) during a traditional sit-down buffet at Istana Darul Hana, 1954. Seated opposite to him is Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin, Governor Anthony Abell, and palace dignitaries.

esteem.[60] Apparently MacDonald was supposed to convince the Raja Isteri of the benefits of sending the royal children to school in England. The Sultan initially agreed to admit his children, HRH Princes Hassanal and his brother Mohamed as well as the daughters Pengiran Anak Puteri Masna and Pengiran Anak Puteri Nor`ain, to MacDonald's alma mater, Bedales School in Sussex.[61] The Sultan planned to stay with his wife in England from August 1960 until about June 1961 while the children were schooling. Later the Sultan changed his mind since the Raja Isteri could not bear to be separated from the children for a long time in a far-away land.[62] Hence, the princes were admitted to the Jalan Gurney School

60 Malcolm MacDonald's note of conversation with H.H. the Sultan of Brunei, 30 Sept. 1958, CO 1030/608.

61 D.C. White to Hector Jacks, Headmaster, Bedales School, 23 Dec. 1958, BA 1617/1983 (SUK Series 4) Part 3, Item 6. However, the Principal of Bedales School was unable to admit the daughters of the Sultan as they were too young; Hector Jacks to D.C. White, 22 Sept. 1959, ibid., Item 12. D.C. White to Hector Jacks, 2 Nov. 1959, ibid., Item 14.

62 The Raja Isteri was behind the Sultan's decision to cancel plans for the children's schooling in England. D.C. White to Hector Jacks, 2 Nov. 1959, BA 1617/1983 (SUK Series 4),

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in Kuala Lumpur in Malaya. On the other hand, the British officials in Malaya and Brunei at the time concluded that sending the royal children to study in Malaya was another sign of the Sultan's keenness to be close to Malaya, which in fact may not have been the case.

During this time MacDonald met the Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman ('the Tunku') and the Brunei Sultan separately. MacDonald's discussions with the Tunku were, however, not viewed favourably in British circles as he was faulted for having prematurely given erroneous impressions to the Tunku regarding the idea of a super federation between Malaya, Singapore and the three Borneo territories. MacDonald had to provide long explanations to the Colonial Office on the matter.[63] It may be that the Brunei Sultan also grew anxious when he became a reluctant privy to the 'grand design' of a Malaysian Federation at its embryonic stage.

In rejecting the Malaysia Federation proposal in July 1963, Sultan Omar once more proved his independence and intransigence. His decision to stay out of Malaysia upset the plans of many of its promoters, including Tunku Abdul Rahman, Lee Kuan Yew, and the British officialdom.[64] Sultan Omar's decision to stay out of the Malaysia Federation would not have surprised MacDonald given his previous experience with the Sultan. Despite agreeing with Tunku Abdul Rahman's idea of the grand design of Malaysia, MacDonald, nonetheless, remained wary about the idea of the forced participation of Brunei as well as the other neighbouring states of Sarawak and North Borneo. The Colonial Office also became apprehensive about Malaysia's imperial designs over the Borneo territories.[65] Building a strong federation of the three British Borneo territories was considered a prerequisite to any merger with Malaya and Singapore. Once this project

Item 14. Hence, the princes were admitted to the Jalan Gurney School in Kuala Lumpur. Tun Abdul Razak to Wan Ahmad (State Secretary, Brunei), 4 Dec. 1959, ibid., Item 20.

63 See Secret, Telegram Nos. 210 and 237, 2 Feb. 1959, Secretary of State to the Governors of North Borneo and Sarawak, CO 1030/608, for a Colonial Office understanding of the controversial conversation between the Tunku and MacDonald.

64 For literature on the Malaysia Federation proposals and Brunei's rejection, see A.J. Stockwell, ed., *Malaya: British documents on the end of empire* (London: HMSO, 2004); Muhammad Hadi Abdullah, 'Brunei's political development and the formation of Malaysia: 1961–1967' (Ph.D. diss., University of Hull, 2002); Mohamed Noordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore separation: Political unification in the Malaysian region, 1945–1965* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1974); Greg Poulgrain, *The genesis of Konfrontasi: Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, 1945–1965* (Bathurst: Crawford House, 1998); Ghazali Shafie, *Memoir on the formation of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1998).

65 Governor of Sarawak to John Martin, Colonial Office, 6 Apr. 1956, CO 1030/164, 59/5/01.

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had failed and the Sultan rejected Brunei becoming a part of Malaysia in July 1963, MacDonald cautioned the British to refrain from putting further undue pressure on Brunei, as the idea was pursued until the early 1970s.

The roving British envoy after retirement

Harold Wilson's government (1964–70) appointed MacDonald as a roving envoy for Britain. Having retired from public service in July 1969, he continued to perform yeomen service by becoming a principal troubleshooter during diplomatic fiascos between Britain and Brunei. His friend Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin, since abdicating the throne in October 1967 in favour of his eldest son Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, had become the power behind the throne. Sultan Omar, who now assumed the title of Paduka Seri Begawan Sultan (the venerated one), was in no mood to give up the royal prerogatives in favour of a democratic polity as desired by many British promoters.[66] Ever since the December 1962 rebellion engineered by the People's Party of Brunei (PRB) had failed, he loathed the local politicians and spurned all efforts to bring about democratic reforms in Brunei.[67] In the aftermath, the sultanate came under emergency rule (which remains in existence) followed by the suspension of the first written Constitution of Brunei promulgated in September 1959. The Seri Begawan Sultan had no qualms about continuing his autocratic policies. By 1965 under British pressure, however, the Brunei Legislative Council was reconstituted to choose new members. The newly formed political party Barisan Kemerdekaan Rakyat (BAKER) made various demands for a representative and cabinet form of government proposed under White Paper 4/1965 which was supported by the British Labour government.[68] Further pressure came from Harold Wilson, who announced in Parliament that his government would review the British–Brunei Agreement of 1959 to bring important changes to the kingdom's protectorate status and to hand over full responsibility to the Brunei government.[69] Meanwhile, Malaysia persisted in trying to persuade Brunei to join the Federation. Never before had Seri Begawan Sultan and his successor Sultan Haji Hassanal faced such a challenge to keep their country and the dynasty intact.

The worst was yet to come. During the constitutional talks in London in the summer of 1967 Sultan Omar was pitted against a cool, tough and

66 See Stockwell, 'Britain and Brunei'.

67 On Brunei politics after the 1962 rebellion, see Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin and Britain*, ch. 9–11.

68 The White Paper came in for detailed discussion in the Brunei Legislative Council, *Majlis Meshyuarat Negeri Brunei, Penyata Rasmi (Hansard)*, vol. 12, 22 Dec. 1965: 95–113.

69 *Hansard, Parliamentary Debates,* House of Commons, vol. 735, 8 Nov. 1966, p. 1150.

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no-nonsense new secretary of state, Herbert Bowden, who showed little deference to the Brunei monarch and 'talked down to him'. MacDonald complained that Sir Omar was treated 'as if he were a stupid out-of-date Sultan who did not understand what is happening in his own country of Brunei and who is ignorant of twentieth century developments in the world etc.'[70] Sir Omar had returned to Brunei in a huff owing to his brusque treatment in Whitehall. To make matters worse, the British Foreign Office transferred Her Majesty's High Commissioner Frank D. Webber from Brunei to Australia in July 1967.[71] Webber had counted among Sir Omar's personal friends. Sir Omar was resentful of the fact that the British had not consulted him in accordance with the letter and spirit of the 1959 British–Brunei Agreement. The Brunei palace tried its best to revoke this transfer, which was considered a personal affront, if not an insult, meted to Sir Omar by the British authorities.

Unable to get the British envoy's transfer annulled, Sir Omar announced his abdication on the night of 4 October 1967 when he was only 53 years of age and still mentally and physically fit. His eldest son Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, who was only 21 years old, was proclaimed as the twenty-ninth Sultan of Brunei on 5 October 1967. Presumably the Frank Webber affair precipitated Sir Omar's decision to abdicate, but it was also compounded by British pressure to expedite the introduction of a representative system of government. Whichever the case may be, Sir Omar's sudden and unexpected decision to abdicate took many by surprise. Saunders has suggested that Sir Omar abdicated to extricate himself from personal pledges concerning constitutional changes which he deemed to be unwise and would not be binding on his son as Sultan.[72]

The new High Commissioner-designate A.R. Adair's request to present his official credentials to the Sultan was not accepted. The impasse lasted almost six months, creating a diplomatic void as many official matters related to British–Brunei negotiations came to a standstill. The stubborn ex-Sultan Omar and the young Sultan did not want to budge. Finally,

70 Tel. No. 6, 13 Jan. 1968, Malcolm MacDonald to Commonwealth Office, para. 1 (b), Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 24/215.

71 Details of correspondence can be found in N. Pritchard to Bowden, 31 Aug. 1967, FCO 24/206. See also Commonwealth Office to Brunei, 18 Sept. 1967, FCO 24/206; Webber to Commonwealth Office, 19 Mar. 1968, FCO 032/21069. See also Internal Security Situation, Letter from R.M. Hunt, High Commissioner, Brunei to R.A. Hibbert, Office of the Political Adviser to the C-in-C, Far East, Singapore, 2 Nov. 1967, FCO 24/212; Secretary of State to Sultan, 2 Aug. 1967, FCO 24/206; Webber to Commonwealth Office, 12 Feb. 1968, FCO 24/206.

72 Graham Saunders, *A history of Brunei* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 160.

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in early January 1968, Whitehall decided to send Malcolm MacDonald to placate the ex-Sultan. MacDonald realised that Omar had reasons to be unhappy. Having visited the Brunei palace on 12 January 1968 MacDonald praised the ex-Sultan as a 'devoted and rather sensible (though admittedly sometimes obstinate) and a friend of Britain' who had been shabbily treated in London. In reference to Webber's transfer, MacDonald agreed with the Sultan that Her Majesty's Government may have broken the stipulations in the 1959 British–Brunei Agreement, which required that the Sultan should be consulted before the appointment of a high commissioner. MacDonald succeeded in pacifying the Sultan and convinced him that 'the juxtaposition of Weber's transfer with the constitutional decisions was a coincidence.'[73] In the end, MacDonald's personal diplomacy broke the ice, and as George Thomson, the Secretary of State admitted: 'it took several hours of tactful handling by Malcolm MacDonald to restore the ex-Sultan (Sir Omar)'s confidence in our good will and to agree to resume normal relations' between Brunei and Britain.[74]

There was also another serious issue that cropped up regarding the future of Brunei in the wake of the Britain's plan to implement the withdrawal of its troops east of Suez by December 1970. This was to be followed by the abrogation of the protectorate status Brunei had enjoyed since the late nineteenth century and the termination of the British–Brunei Agreement of 1959. Originally Whitehall had proposed to summon the Sultan and Sir Omar to London in March of that year to inform them of the decision to withdraw. But if the duo was not properly prepared for the drastic announcement further complications awaited the British. First, the duo could go back on their word as given to MacDonald in January to accept the credentials from the newly appointed high commissioner, due to take place on 6 May 1968. Another critical development was, as George Thomson, the Minister of State at the Foreign Office warned, that the Sultan and Sir Omar could decide to hit Britain's economic interests by withdrawing sterling balances to the tune of one hundred million and also restrict the concessions granted to Shell and so on.[75] Finally the arguments of both MacDonald and Thomson to hold back the withdrawal talks for the time being were accepted in London. Meanwhile Frank Webber was sent back temporarily to Brunei for a period of three months as a face-saving device to make way for A.R. Adair to submit his credentials to the Brunei palace as negotiated by MacDonald.

73 Ibid.
74 George Thomson to the Prime Minister, 7 Mar. 1968, Prime Minister's Office Files (PREM) 13/3181, 84393.
75 Ibid.

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MacDonald's attitude stood in sharp contrast to the policies and efforts of his colleagues who served in Brunei and supported much needed political reforms to give a share of power to the people. MacDonald was hardly concerned with democratic reforms in Brunei while his tolerance of Sir Omar's autocratic behaviour reinforced the latter's obstinacy. MacDonald's approach, for example, can be contrasted with that of Anthony Abell, the Governor of Sarawak, who also doubled up as High Commissioner for Brunei (1950–59) and devoted considerable energy towards democratising Brunei, but to no avail.[76] He tried to promote a democratic constitution in which the Brunei Sultan would hold his position as a constitutional monarch. Having failed to introduce democratic institutions such as a legislative council and a cabinet form of government, which were thwarted by the wily Sultan Omar, a dejected Abell wrote that:

> It has been hard and so far unrewarding work. The ignorance and prejudice are of depth and darkness which are never encountered in Sarawak and unless the ballot box can produce an entirely new type of politician unlike any we have so far seen, I have doubts of Brunei's capacity to make much progress in the political or administrative field.[77]

It is no surprise that Abell did not endear himself to the Sultan like MacDonald did. Sir Omar simply brushed aside political reformists — both British and among his own people. MacDonald admitted that

> they say that some these [political leaders] are not bad and with experience will become better but most of them are very unsatisfactory selfish characters with no sincere interest whatever in the Brunei people's welfare. They declare that the man who is supremely trusted and popular in every section of the population is Sir Omar.[78]

MacDonald by his complicity with Sir Omar's approach placed too much premium on the prerogative of the Sultan as an independent ruler. First, when the Sultan refused to join the North Borneo Federation, and second when he spurned Malaysia Federation, and now repudiating the White paper of 4/1965 to introduce full representative government.

Returning to Brunei for a second time in the same year on 1 August 1968, MacDonald tried to explain the terms of withdrawal to Sir Omar and Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah. In deference to their wishes, the best that MacDonald could achieve was to buy time of a year or so for the

76 On Abell's long struggle to introduce a democratic and liberal Constitution for Brunei see B.A. Hussainmiya, *The Brunei Constitution: An inside history* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Brunei Press, 2000).

77 Anthony Abell to W.I.J. Wallace (CO), 15 Apr. 1958, CO 1030/461.

78 MacDonald to George Thomson, 14 Mar. 1968, FCO 24/236.

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withdrawal of British protection for Brunei. On 16 January 1968, the Wilson government decided to accelerate the final date for withdrawal from Singapore, Malaysia, and the Persian Gulf by the end of 1971 instead of the mid-1970s. Britain decided to start withdrawing first from the Sultanate by March 1970 whereas the date for withdrawal was fixed for the end of 1971 in the case of Singapore, Malaysia and the Persian Gulf. MacDonald urged his government to execute the withdrawal simultaneously for Brunei, that is, by the end of 1971 and not by March 1970 as originally planned. His argument was that it would spread anxiety among the Southeast Asian countries about Britain's undue hurry to withdraw its forces east of the Suez.[79] At any rate Brunei received a fortuitous reprieve as the Labour government lost in the 1970 polls. In a revised policy, the Conservative government signed a new British–Brunei amended agreement of November 1971, which guaranteed continued British defense support while granting full internal self-government for Brunei.[80]

MacDonald's role in Brunei affairs continued under the new Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah. Due to Sir Omar's stubbornness and Malaysia's recalcitrance, especially under Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, Brunei's relations with its neighbour were at a low ebb. This was further compounded by conflicts with neighbouring Sarawak.[81] On the one hand, the ex-Brunei rebels of the banned PRB received tacit support from Malaysia, which, still coveting Brunei, found a champion in Tun Razak to espouse their cause in the United Nations with a view to expediting Brunei's independence.[82]

In a bid to promote fresh rapport between Brunei and Malaysia, MacDonald even suggested in 1968 a revival of his original design of a federation of the three northern Borneo territories which could come together under the Sultan of Brunei as a titular head of state.[83] His proposal was in effect a mirror image of the PRB's vision since the 1960s to unite three Bornean states which they termed 'Kalimantan Utara'.[84] The PRB even formed an army by the same name — Tentera National Kalimantan Utara (TNKU). According to MacDonald's revived proposals in 1974 there would be no changes effected to the existing borders between Brunei and

79 Ibid.; George Thomson to PM, 7 Mar. 1968, PREM 13/1381, 84394.
80 Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin and Britain,* p. 376.
81 See Nani Suriyani Haji Abu Bakar, *Brunei's political development between 1906–1984: Challenges and difficulties over its security and survival* (Ph.D. diss., University of Leeds, 2006), ch. 5–7.
82 Haji Zaini Hj Ahmad, *The People's Party of Brunei: Selected documents* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 1987).
83 MacDonald to Thomson, 14 Mar. 1968, FCO 24/236.
84 See Poulgrain, *The genesis of Konfrontasi.*

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its neighbouring state of Sarawak, which remained a big bone of contention, while the Sultan would relinquish all claims to Limbang. If the scheme eventuated, Brunei could in turn either be joined to Peninsular Malaysia in the form of a confederation or form ties with Singapore.[85] However, other British officials thought this a far-fetched and outmoded proposal. J.K. Hickman, the British High Commissioner to Malaysia, scoffed at the deal as being unrealistic since the Malaysian government would consider it to be totally unacceptable and an interference in their internal affairs.[86] D. Gordon of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office also agreed that 'if it were to come to the Malaysians' ears that MacDonald was talking about the possible attractions of a North Borneo Federation, particularly with a possible link with Singapore, we should be in trouble'.[87] Sir Omar, on his part, stood his ground during the Brunei Defence Council meeting held on 8 March 1974 when he objected to Brunei entering a grouping of the three northern Borneo states.[88]

Even if Brunei's decision to stay out of Malaysia was irrevocable, MacDonald's persistent efforts to revive the idea had some merits. He had come to realise that the tiny Sultanate of Brunei could not stand on her own feet surrounded by powerful neighbours and would one day have to seek some sort of union with Malaysia because of economic and cultural affinities. Thus, supporting the creation of a wider Malaysia in the form of a looser federation than what had been already accomplished in the original state of Malaysia[89] would benefit Brunei. Nonetheless, he did not wish to see Brunei suffering under Malaysian hegemony like the sovereign states of Sarawak and North Borneo. Hence he advised his successor Robert Scott in 1956 not to force the Malaysia idea onto Brunei. British officials, on the other hand, did not want to let the genie out of a bottle in promoting a second attempt at a Brunei–Malaysia merger as they agreed that this was a matter best left to Brunei when Britain granted her independence sooner or later. MacDonald was still alive when the British government entered into an agreement with Brunei in 1979 paving the way for Brunei's independence five years later.

An interesting postscript remains to be added regarding MacDonald's final trip to Brunei in mid-September 1979, when he attended the funeral

85 Record of meeting between Lord Goronwy-Roberts and Malcolm MacDonald in the House of Lords, 16 July 1974, FCO24/1962.
86 Hickman to Galsworthy, 18 July 1974, FCO 24/1962.
87 Gordon to Hickman, 9 Aug. 1974, FCO 24/1962.
88 Cited by Wilford to Lord Goronwy-Roberts, 27 July 1974, FCO 24/1962.
89 MacDonald to Thomson, 14 Mar. 1968, FCO 24/236; A.R. Adair to J. Johnston, 11 Mar. 1968, FCO 24/236; Adair to Robin, 29 Feb. 1968, FCO 24/222.

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of Sir Omar's consort, HRH Paduka Seri Begawan Raja Isteri Pengiran Anak Damit, whom he held in high esteem as a kind hostess during several of his past visits to the Istana. During the funeral, the Brunei government hosted him as usual at Istana Edinburgh, the royal guest quarters, where he stayed for four days. He would have liked to have a personal meeting with both Sir Omar and Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah. Apart from the condolences exchanged at the funeral, MacDonald regretted that he did not 'have the honour and pleasure of talk with His Highness [Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah and Your Highness [Sir Omar] as we had planned.'[90] But he received a nice letter of gratitude from Sir Omar and Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah for his kind sentiments and for attending the funeral. From Brunei, MacDonald moved on to the neighbouring state of Sarawak to observe volunteers from the British Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), an organisation founded by Alec Dickson and which MacDonald supported.[91] In his letter to Sir Omar, MacDonald said there had been some problems with the VSO in certain Asian countries, such as Ceylon, and he was due to visit them in the following year, and if he happened to visit Sarawak he would let His Highness know so that he might have the privilege and pleasure of meeting him. In late 1979 MacDonald sent a book through the British High Commissioner in Brunei, A.C. Watson, to Sir Omar, who expressed pleasure in receiving the book which he said he would read with the help of a dictionary as in the case of MacDonald's previous book, *Angkor*.[92] MacDonald passed away in England in January 1981, and thus came to an end an unusual saga of intimate diplomacy.

Concluding remarks

Malcolm Macdonald was not a conventional diplomat of colonial vintage in the usual sense of the term. Having served a long period in high administrative positions, he developed an empathetic understanding of the local leaders who came under British colonial rule. He approached his colonial subjects with such compassion that at times he courted censure from his British colleagues for flouting their commands.

To begin with, towards the Brunei Sultans, MacDonald adopted an indulgent attitude to say the least and particularly with Sir Omar Ali

90 Draft letter from MacDonald to Sultan of Brunei, MacDonald Papers, 40/6/43.
91 Alec Dickson founded VSO in 1958. Dickson's brother was director of education in Sarawak, one of the first territories to which volunteers were sent.
92 Sir Muda Omar Ali Saifuddin to Malcolm MacDonald, 19 Nov. 1979, MacDonald Papers, 40/6/47.

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Saifuddin he showed at times a greater deference than his superiors in London would have liked him to. A Canadian diplomat, Escot Reid, once said of MacDonald that 'all his geese were [his] swans'. Similarly he was known for his stooping to 'flattery of big men'.[93] One wonders how much MacDonald, 'the waffler', could have achieved by nudging Brunei to federate with the other two North Borneo territories and later Malaysia. My reading of the primary sources indicates that his method of 'gentle persuasion' hardly worked vis-à-vis a strong-willed and shrewd personality like Sir Omar Ali Saifuddin. Yet, despite their different characters and approaches, the fact remains that MacDonald and Sir Omar maintained a lasting friendship, an asset which the British government tried to exploit in its negotiations with Brunei. According to some who were familiar with MacDonald, 'His personality was complicated and changeable; to different people and at different times, he presented a bewildering variety of facets.'[94] No doubt supported by people like MacDonald, Sir Omar succeeded in gaining royal ascendancy. At a time when Brunei could have easily embraced principles of democracy during imperial retreat, MacDonald's actions thwarted the ideals of his own colleagues like Anthony Abell, who desired to see a Western-style democratic Brunei.

Appendix 1

Rt. Hon'ble Malcolm MacDonald's Felicitation Speech to welcome the new Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin[95]

We are the privileged witnesses this morning of a Coronation ceremony as colourful in pageantry, beautiful in artistry and hallowed in history as any that is now celebrated in any land under the sun. Its details have become formalised and crystallised and entrusted by centuries-old tradition, yet it was performed today as spontaneously and freshly as on any similar occasion in the last thousand years.

Brunei is an ancient and honourable State. The line of the Sultans stretches back unbroken for countless generations, to a time when the mists of unrecorded history shroud and conceal the hills round Brunei Bay. During all those centuries its Sultans have been crowned, to a wailing of flutes and the beat of royal drums, in their capital beside the serene waters of Darul'Salam.

93 Sanger, *Malcolm MacDonald*. p. 442.
94 Quoted from Lyon, 'The public and private lives of a British envoy': 109–17.
95 Speech by His Excellency Right Honourable Mr. Malcolm MacDonald, May 1951, CO 943/2, (59726), Item 34. A copy is also in MacDonald Papers 37/2/7 (v).

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To-day we have seen the 28th known Sultan of Brunei crowned, and heard him most regally proclaimed. I am no historian, but I say with confidence that in all the long possession of his predecessors no ruler ascended the throne more richly clothed already not only in the allegiance but also in the affections of his subjects.

We here all know his Highness. We have seen him in a happy family circle with his gracious Consort and their charming children. We have watched him too dealing with matters of State. If I may say so, we know his modesty and dignity, his sympathy and understanding, his serenity and wisdom, his respect for his fellowmen and his reverence for God.

Brunei is fortunate in having a number of experienced and gracious men amongst its high Officers and Councillors of State. Pre-eminent amongst them in the latter years of the late Sultan's reign was Duli Pengiran Bendahara, who now sits on the throne.

If the occupant of this throne were selected, not by the ancient laws of heredity but by the popular choice of all his people, the same young statesman would occupy it as we see gracing it this morning. That is one reason why to-day's ceremony was no mere empty echo of something which has been repeated over and over again in the past, but a fresh, spontaneous, enthusiastic and joyous acclamation, a heartfelt dedication of a new Sovereign to his people and of a people to their Sovereign.

This happy event delights not only Brunei's own citizens, but also all Brunei's friends round the world. Nowhere is it hailed more gladly than in Great Britain, the Protecting Power, whose relations with Brunei have been close and cordial for more than a hundred years — but never closer or more cordial than they are to-day. In the name of His Majesty King George and of the Government and people of Britain, I greet His Highness, and salute his virtues, and congratulate him on his Coronation, and wish him well. And I utter fervently for him the words of the prayer which we in Britain speak for our own beloved Sovereign. May God 'Send him victorious,

Happy and glorious,
Long to reign.'
Long Live the Sultan!

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