

David Kenneth Bassett. *The Factory of the English East India Company at Bantam, 1602–1682*. Edited and Introduced by Dianne Lewis and a Preface by Victor King. Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM Press), 2011.

David Kenneth Bassett (1931–1989) spent several years teaching at the University of Malaya (which was then in Singapore), and at the same institution following its relocation to Kuala Lumpur. In 1965 he was appointed to the faculty of the University of Hull, where he served as Director of the Centre for South-East Asian Studies until 1988, a year before his premature death in 1989 at the age of 59. Bassett's career thus spans a formative period in Southeast Asian studies. In 1950, a Department of Southeast Asian History was established in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, and two years later Bassett entered the programme as a doctoral candidate. His dissertation, "The Factory of the East India Company at Bantam 1602–1682," was submitted in 1955, the same year that D.G.E. Hall published his *History of South-East Asia*, which represents the first attempt at a regional coverage. As one of the early SOAS graduates, Bassett was a pioneer in the embryonic field of Southeast Asian studies, continuing on to become a world-renowned specialist on European trade in the Malay world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Though Bassett never published his thesis, at the time of his death he was engaged in developing a more extensive study of British activities between 1660 and 1715. This project was terminated by his untimely demise, and we will never see the book he planned, which would have incorporated forty years of research. *The Factory of the East India Company at Bantam*, however, offers a taste of what might have been included. In voluntarily contributing her services to prepare this manuscript for publication, Dianne Lewis (herself an authority on trade in the Melaka Straits region) deserves our heartfelt thanks. Not merely has she provided a valuable introduction that contextualises Bassett and his work; she has also judiciously edited the text and compiled further explanatory notes when necessary. A preface by Victor King, Bassett's colleague at Hull, makes a further contribution by setting the book in a personal framework.

In the introduction, Lewis notes that Bassett's decision to focus on the activities of the English East India Company (EIC) in Banten (west Java) was somewhat unusual, since at that time the study of Indonesia was generally considered to be a Dutch preserve. Overshadowed by the Dutch

East India Company or *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC), the long English association with Banten (which began in 1602, and only ended when they were expelled by the Sultan in 1682) is often overlooked. During this period, however, Banten became a centre through which the English established a fragile but functioning trade network that included numerous areas of Southeast Asia, notably Makassar, Maluku, the Banda islands as well as Siam, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Though their efforts to penetrate the Asian mainland were ultimately unsuccessful, the EIC Directors hoped that Banten's strategic position would render it a stepping stone to the elusive markets of China, Taiwan and Japan. In Bassett's words, as far as the EIC was concerned, "the Bantam Agency was predominate in formulating and controlling Far Eastern policy in the period before 1683" (p. 181).

While Bassett also used Dutch sources, he drew principally on the original correspondence of the East India Company and its letter books, which are described more fully in his appendix. Providing exhaustive detail on trade figures, these documents also track the English struggle to maintain their position in the burgeoning pepper trade and their efforts to prevent their Dutch rivals from gaining the kind of monopoly they had acquired over the rarer spices of nutmeg, cloves and mace. This preoccupation in the primary material provides strong support for the book's central theme, "the fierce commercial rivalry between the English and the Dutch Companies" (p. 1). At the same time, these sources also include a wealth of information on trade that will be of great value to anyone working on the economic history of Southeast Asia, as well as its global connections. Who would have thought, for instance, that the price of Sumatran pepper could be adversely affected by the disruption to supply chains caused by wars in Poland? Bassett's analysis also highlights the changing policies of the EIC, especially regarding the relationship between Banten and the principal Indian factories, and the ways in which individual employees in the field executed or interpreted the directives they received.

Although there are numerous works on the British Company in India, Bassett's knowledge of the inner workings of the EIC in the less-researched field of Southeast Asia is unparalleled, and throughout the book his material offers many intriguing insights. We are reminded, for instance, that seventeenth-century Jambi, which receives little attention in Indonesian history, was the most important port for the English because of its pepper supplies, delivered by people in the "ulu" (upstream areas), i.e., Minangkabau. More particularly, we are shown that the great aim of the Company, the "chief scope of our desires" was to "drive a trade without the

transportation of money" and when at all possible, to sell "English manufactures," especially cloth. In their unbending pursuit of these goals, English factors were often attempting to purvey woollen goods unsuited to Southeast Asian markets or Indian textiles that had not been selected with an eye to local tastes.

In Banten itself relations with the court were often difficult. Although experienced EIC representatives recognised the niceties that accompanied any trading transaction, it was not easy to persuade their superiors in England that additional expenses or administrative changes were justified. EIC Directors were not easily convinced, for example, that it would assist English interests to designate the Banten representative as "President" rather than "Agent," even though they were told that "the heathens do much stand upon title of honor, and will show respect accordingly" (p. 37). At times it was impossible to carry out trade because suitable gifts for the ruler and his family had not been sent, and because the Directors balked at the frequency with which such gifts were required. It is hardly surprising that the sultan of Banten staunchly resisted English pressure for special privileges, comparing Banten to a door where those that desired entrance might enter, and those who would not accept local customs might "stay out" (p. 33). English impatience with protracted negotiations that accompanied most transactions is nicely captured in exasperated claims that logical argument was not possible with the Javanese and that "to give a blunt answer to their extravagant demands was considered a crime" (p. 199). Decision making in far-off London was further complicated when EIC agents supplied misleading information or misrepresented the situation. Despite the failure of English attempts to enter Japan in the early seventeenth century, for instance, letters sent to London in the 1670s could still convey the idea that the Japanese were waiting eagerly for an English return, and that they would provide a major market English cloth, since they were clothed only in "old paper and such-like trash" (p. 169).

EIC factors in Southeast Asia struggled with problems such as shortages of cloth, uncompetitive pricing, the demand for silver rials rather than textiles as payment, occasional outbreaks of violence and particularly the high rate of mortality. Because the EIC had banked so heavily on the trade in pepper, it was badly affected by the glut that developed in the late seventeenth century, the fall in prices, and European willingness to use cheaper ginger brought from America as a substitute. In 1678 the London warehouses contained around 19,000 bags of unsold pepper, a telling reminder of a steadily declining trade.

The reader should thus be aware that the narrative Bassett offers is basically one of English trade, with the discussion dominated by economic transactions. The text is heavily weighted with names of ships and personnel and with lists of cargoes, prices, products, invoices and instructions to traders. An expanded index and some graphs would have been helpful in enabling the reader to follow the movement of individuals as well as the economic fortunes of specific products. The nature of the sources means that only very occasionally do we catch a glimpse of indigenous concerns or activities, and nowhere do we find the dense detail that characterises the records of the Dutch East India Company. Nonetheless, in the interstices of English trading concerns there are still glimpses of significant local developments. The migration of Chinese to Southeast Asia in the seventeenth century is well established, but in Banten their dominance was such that the English could trade with "none but China men," with a specific reference to the Chinese Muslims who controlled the Banten market (p. 14). A major economic change was the dramatic expansion of sugar cultivation. "It is almost incredible," commented the Banten President in 1630, "what water courses they have cut, and what a goodly compass of ground they have these two years past manured to the purposed aforesaid" (p. 31). The interest of the Banten court in English shipbuilding techniques is also a noteworthy development, and the attractive inducements offered by the Sultan lured a number of Englishmen away from the Company service. For instance, in 1667 one was employed as captain of the sultan's ship to Manila, while other English seamen worked as shipbuilders and helped crew ships to Manila and Macao. With access to this new technology, the Banten fleet was transformed from a fleet of small *perahu* to one of ocean-going ships (p. 186). The sultan himself became a merchant, sending his own vessels to open up direct trade with Manila; a royal ship built at Rembang (east Java) under English supervision, the *Blessing*, sailed to Persia in 1671 (p. 161). Thus, although Bassett was limited by the sources available to him, a careful reader will be able to glean much new information about local societies. It is interesting to read that in Cambodia the culling of deer to provide hides for the Japan market was concentrated in September when rains forced deer on to higher ground, where they were captured with men using arrows and dogs (p. 85).

In an age when digitalisation, scanning, computers and other technologies have made any research infinitely easier than in the past, it is important to recognise that Bassett's meticulous investigation involved laboriously copying of the relevant documents by hand, and that his thesis made its way into its final form via a manual typewriter. Nor should we

view access to the sources as a simple exercise in reading, for seventeenth-century English handwriting and style can be quite idiosyncratic, and understanding the vocabulary used in maritime trade demands specialist knowledge. For example, "suckles" was an old unit of measurement, weighing about 72 kg, while "kentlidge" was the name given to heavier goods (typically green ginger, benzoin and sugar, or woods) stored as ballast near the keel of a ship when it was carrying a light cargo such as pepper).

In evaluating Bassett's approach, one must also remember that his dissertation was written sixty years ago; the very brevity of the secondary sources he lists is an indication of the volume of academic studies that have appeared since the 1950s. As Dr. King points out in his preface, Bassett embarked on his career well before the debates about "Euro-centric" versus "autonomous" history gained ground, and at a time when a focus on European activities in Southeast Asia required no justification. Nonetheless, his meticulous exploration of Dutch and English sources provided the groundwork for much subsequent research on indigenous histories, and his publications will be cited in virtually all bibliographies dealing with the early modern Malay world. In this book, he never deviates from his chosen theme of English-Dutch rivalry, encapsulated in a closing paragraph that describes the English departure from Banten in 1682. Attributing their eviction to Dutch machinations and influence over the new sultan, the English factors essayed a show of status to the end, going "down the river sounding our trumpet with a flag in our boat." As they passed "all the Chinese, Javas etc. appeared . . . demonstrating their kindness by their bowing to the ground." When the English vessel reached the mouth of the river, the Dutch immediately opened the boomgates, "having long desired that which they now have accomplished"—the assertion of the VOC's economic supremacy (p. 212).

As this episode demonstrates, the seventeenth century was not a particularly happy period for English interests in Southeast Asia. Throughout the region factories were often forced to close down, not only because of economic problems but also because of the lack of support from England, preoccupied by years of civil war and political unrest. In consequence, Bassett argues, the way was left open for the Dutch to extend their influence into all the Southeast Asia pepper kingdoms. Although his hypothesis that in different circumstances the VOC would never have succeeded in excluding the English from Southeast Asian trade is certainly open to debate, *The Factory of the English East India Company at Bantam* must stand as a significant contribution to British and Southeast Asian

history. David Bassett never completed his envisaged work on British trade, which have undoubtedly have been his *magnus opus*; nevertheless, we are fortunate that Dr. Lewis so valued his academic contribution that she has made his pioneering thesis available. By the same token, we should be grateful that Universiti Sains Malaysia Press was willing to take on the task of publication. One might hope that the enterprise represented by this book will encourage a re-assessment of other unpublished theses that deserve a wider audience.

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