

*Brunei: The Modern Southeast-Asian Islamic Sultanate.* By David Leake, Jr. Jefferson. NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 1989. Pp. xi, 178.

A cardinal rule in reviewing any book is to avoid faulting the author for failing to write something he had not intended to in the first instance. David Leake, Jr. set out to write only an “overview of the Sultanate, past and present” based on the knowledge he had accumulated over a brief period of three years as a sub-editor of the weekly (now daily) *Borneo Bulletin*, the sultanate’s only English newspaper. Leake was unceremoniously expelled from Brunei subsequently for the apparent indiscretion of writing an article with an unflattering slant on how the sultanate’s oil wealth was apportioned, for overseas publication. Following his expulsion, Leake continued to keep in touch with events in Brunei through an editorial position in a daily newspaper in neighbouring Kota Kinabalu, the capital of the East Malaysian state of Sabah.

Leake’s book is a readable introductory work drawing on, to its credit, much ethnographic, historical, economic, and political information from a wide range of published sources. It contains no footnotes and is decidedly unanalytical and makes no pretense at being a weighty academic tome. Scholars will undoubtedly take issue with him on any number of ethnographic and historical points which he takes to heart as facts in his book. Leake suggests, for example, that at its zenith under Sultan Bolkiah, most if not all the Borneo sultanates had been made vassal states of Brunei, a fact disputed by a number of historians, in particular the late Dr David Basset in his Hull monograph *British Attitudes to Indigenous States in Southeast Asia in the Nineteenth Century*. And on page 49, Leake posits that Sir Omar rejected merger with Malaysia in 1963 because of the people’s and the royal family’s “immense pride in their ancient realm”. It would have been more accurate to argue that Sir Omar was only too aware that any sudden immersion in Malaysia would have led to the precipitous collapse of the monarchical state he had so carefully built.

Notwithstanding his expulsion from Brunei, Leake has refrained from the obvious temptation to “exact revenge” and his book is a surprisingly

balanced and reasonable account in striking contrast to the extremes evident in James Bartholomew's glib and racy work *The Richest Man in the World* and Lord Chalfont's glossy *By God's Will: A Portrait of the Sultan of Brunei*.

Brunei Darussalam is very much an anomaly — a bifurcated state with a meagre population and vast oil and gas reserves. Perhaps the last of its kind, the sultanate retains a political system held together by Islamic tradition and headed by a sultan who is the very fount of all power and sovereignty. Most other sultanates have disappeared in the maelstrom of history whilst yet others have been woven into the fabric of new states. It is not surprising, therefore, that the book should reflect some very typical foreign preoccupations with Brunei, principally whether Brunei's absolute monarchy can survive and retain its absolute monarchical form in this day and age. Indeed, in a world where all talk is of democracy, what is the place of a sultanate?

In his concluding chapter, Leake points to what he considers to be various areas of stress in the sultanate, but he concludes that

current dynamics make it unlikely that any of the three main potential sources of sudden change (the military, political pressure, and royal family conflict) will have a major impact [on stability] in the near future.

Leake, however, qualifies his assessment with the observation that “because of its small size, a change in a single element can radically alter the whole equation”. Leake might have added that given its smallness and the considerable concern with national security, change if and when it comes, may come suddenly and abruptly, whether from within or outside the sultanate.

One factor that has discouraged scholarly interest in Brunei has been its previously almost total absorption into the United Kingdom's foreign policy and defence network for almost a century. Nestled for so long within the British Lion's moulted pelt, this mysterious “British Protectorate” of the school atlases was ignored by much of the world. Its emergence on 1 January 1984 as a sovereign, independent state has, however, generated considerable interest in the international media, more

often than not to the dismay of the sultan and his government because the coverage by the international media has been perceived to be less than balanced. Leake's book, however, is a readable and more balanced introduction to Brunei.

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