

# THE WHITE RAJAHS OF SHEEPSTOR

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**with an Epilogue written 8 March 2023**

Random discoveries of Dartmoor have always been one of my great pleasures, choosing, or simply coming across, a tor, a mine working, a church or a village that demands to be explored. Thus, it was that some years ago I came upon the tiny village of Sheepstor tucked away amongst the lower slopes of south-west Dartmoor just to the east of Burrator Reservoir.

Often a good place to start a village exploration is the parish church where, in addition to the architectural features it may offer, one may hope to find memorials, inscriptions, artefacts and perhaps even a guide book. St Leonard's Sheepstor is a squat granite church in the Perpendicular Gothic style, dating to about 1450. A simple nave, chancel and south aisle are dominated by a tall, square tower with battlements and four crocketed pinnacles. Before entering the church, I walked around the outside and saw in the north-east corner of the churchyard a collection of tombs surrounded by iron railings, including a massive one in red Aberdeen granite. The inscription on this tomb was:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF SIR JAMES BROOKE KCB, DCL RAJAH AND FOUNDER OF THE SETTLEMENT OF SARAWAK WHO DEPARTED HIS LIFE AT HIS RESIDENCE BURRATOR IN THE PARISH OF SHEEPSTOR THE 11TH DAY OF JUNE 1868 AGED 65 YEARS.

On the far right another of Charles Anthoni Johnson Brooke (1829-1917) the second Rajah of Sarawak and between them two more memorials to Charles Vyner Brooke, (1874-1963), the third Rajah of Sarawak and Bertram Willes Dayrell Brooke, (1876-1965), the Tuan Muda. Beside the enclosure lie seven further memorial stones to members of the Brooke family.

So, who were these Brookes proclaimed as Rajahs of Sarawak? A visit inside St Leonard's helped to unfold an extraordinary story, told in summary through tablets fixed to the church walls, through plaques, busts, stained glass memorial windows and artefacts from Sarawak.

The story began with the birth of James Brooke on 29 April 1803 near Benares, India. He was the fifth child of Thomas Brooke, a senior official of the Honourable East India Company and a High Court Judge, and Anna Maria Stuart, daughter of the 9th Lord Blantyre. Thomas was an affectionate and kindly father who, like all Brookes, reacted against hide-bound bureaucracy, preferring familial loyalty. James had a sister, Emma who married the Reverend Charles Johnson, Vicar of Whitelackington in Somerset, and her family was to loom large in the future history of the Brookes.

It is not surprising that James was spoilt and kept with his parents until the comparatively late age of 12 when he was sent to Britain to attend King Edward VI Grammar School, Norwich, as a boarder. His guardianship was entrusted to his grandmother in Reigate and an indulgent family friend in Bath. His future private secretary and biographer, Spenser St John, said of him:

*The want of regular training was of infinite disadvantage to young Brooke, who thus started life with little knowledge, and with no idea of self-control.*

James, whose only significant achievement was to learn to sail, found school tedious. He ran away to Reigate and taken to Bath where he was given a private tutor. James joined the Indian Army in 1819 becoming a Lieutenant in 1821 and took to army life which gave him scope to develop a taste for wild living and adventure. In 1824 the East India Company embarked on a campaign in Burma and James was given command of an irregular cavalry force which he trained regularly to charge, a manoeuvre he very much relished. In 1825 he led two fearless charges against the Burmese, on the second of which he was shot from his horse. His wound was a bullet lodged in his lung though one source suggests it was in a more intimate location, perhaps to account for the fact that he never showed any inclination to marry and to counter suggestions that he was homosexual though there is no substantive evidence for this.

James was sent back to England, to Bath, where he convalesced and where early in 1826 the bullet was removed through his back. He remained unwell until 1829, a lengthy period, when he read extensively about the East, especially the works of his hero, Sir Stamford Raffles, such as *The History of Java*. In July James set sail on the East Indiaman *Carn Brae Castle* for India to resume his employment with the East India Company. Unfortunately, it went aground and sank off the Isle of Wight though all passengers survived. In March 1830 he set out again on the *Castle Huntley* and because of adverse winds did not reach Madras until 18 July. The Company refused to accept his formal return until he reached Calcutta, an impossible demand within the time remaining. Despite his father arranging for the requirement to be waived James, in a fit of pique, resigned his commission and returned to England aboard the *Castle Huntley* via China.

Over the next few years, James dreamt of buying a schooner and setting out to trade with the East. But with no money and an unsympathetic father who considered 'trade' an unworthy career for his son, James had to keep dreaming until 1834 when his elderly father gave in and bought him a 290-ton brig called *Findlay* which he crewed, stocked with goods and sailed to Macau. The expedition proved a fiasco and after quarrelling with his captain, and failing to sell his goods, sold the boat and stock at a loss before returning to England.

He spent his time supporting his ailing father and when possible, honing his sailing skills. In December 1835 Thomas Brooke died and left James £30,000. Independent at last, in the following spring he purchased a 142-ton schooner, *Royalist*. But on this occasion, he took his time, first making a trial voyage around the Mediterranean and then moving to live in London where he read voraciously and researched at the Admiralty and British Museum. He set his mind on travelling to Borneo and wrote a lengthy prospectus in 1838 which included his political and social ideas summarised by this quotation:

*Any government instituted for the purpose must be directed to the advancement of the native interests and the development of native resources, rather than by a flood of European colonisation to aim at possession only, without reference to the indefeasible rights of the Aborigines.*

James decided to head for North Borneo and Celebes to trade, confident of the advantage he would gain by belonging to the Royal Yacht Squadron and sailing under the white ensign which gave entitlement to treatment equal to that of a ship of the Royal Navy. He finally sailed from Devonport on 16 December 1838 and arrived in Singapore at the end of May 1839. James Brooke was now a very different person than the shy, retiring schoolboy at

Norwich. He was now confident, well-read, ambitious, wealthy and suffused with almost messianic fervour. During nine weeks in Singapore, he charmed the merchants and ladies alike as well as the Governor, Sir George Bonham. But he was impatient to be at sea again and readily responded to the Governor's suggestion that he should sail to Sarawak to meet with Rajah Muda Hashim, the uncle of the Sultan of Brunei. Hashim had moved from Brunei to Kuching, the principal town of Sarawak, and was seeking support from the British to quell persistent Malay revolts against the Brunei ruling family. On 27 July James set sail on the *Royalist* for the Sarawak River and his destiny.

Sarawak is the northern part of the island of Borneo. It was the greater part of the Muslim Empire of Brunei which in the 16th Century had embraced the coastlands of Borneo and the Western Philippines but which by 1839 had been reduced to Sarawak and what is modern Brunei.

The ethnicity of the area was complex, with the ruling classes of Brunei being basically Malay, as well as having deep connections to India and China as a result of successive waves of invasion and settlement. The coast of Sarawak was also settled by Malay merchants and traders as well as significant numbers of Arabs and Chinese. The more numerous indigenous peoples were the Dayak tribes divided broadly into the sedentary Land Dayaks of the western coastal plains and the warlike Sea Dayaks, such as the Iban, who settled along the sinuous rivers that penetrated the tropical rain forest and lived by farming, fishing and piracy. The third main Dayak group was the Orang Ulu such as the Kayan who lived in the interior.

The Sultan of Brunei in 1839 was Omar Ali Saifuddin II but as with many of the ruling family he was mentally weak and his uncle Hashim was chosen as Rajah Muda. This title meant he was heir apparent akin to a Crown Prince and in his case effectively Regent. The other title frequently encountered is Tuan Muda which equates to heir presumptive, who is likely to become ruler unless an heir with a stronger claim is born.

For example, our late queen when Princess Elizabeth, was heir presumptive during the reigns of Edward VIII and her father George VI, as a son could have been born to either. When she became Queen, her son, then Prince Charles, became heir apparent.

In Muslim ruling families, however, the heir apparent, though traditionally the eldest male of the dynasty, is usually chosen after negotiation and intrigue amongst the leading princes. The significance of these titles and rights would shortly be crucial for the Brookes.

James anchored off Kuching on 15 August and fired a 21-gun salute to honour the Rajah Muda. He enjoyed several cordial meetings with Hashim and the Governor, Indera Makota and spent much time exploring the nearby rivers and Dayak settlements, for the first time entering a longhouse and being surprised by a display of thirty heads. Headhunting was very much a Dayak custom and a way for young men to show their prowess before being permitted to marry.

The following year Hashim was still dealing with Dayak rebels and trying to counter the undermining influence of Makota and begged James not to leave Sarawak. He was determined to leave so Hashim said he would offer him the title of Rajah if he stayed. He did not accept as he was tired of the trouble being caused by Makota, but nonetheless did stay and mounted a successful campaign against the rebels. James sailed back to Singapore to buy goods to trade for Sarawak's principal resource, antimony ore. On his return he finally persuaded Hashim to work with him to seek peace with the Dayaks and

abandon Makota. Hashim agreed and drew up a document that declared James Brooke Rajah and Governor of Sarawak on 24 November 1841, paying tribute to the Sultan, though the latter had not confirmed the transfer of power. Neither the Dutch, who controlled most of Borneo, nor the British, opposed James's assumption of control.

In 1842, now settled into a new bungalow, James began to organise his administration and deal with the disaffected Malay and Dayak groups as well as the pirates who seriously disrupted Sarawak's trade. His position vis-à-vis Hashim was still an issue and he decided to sail to Brunei to confront the Sultan. He was well received and secured safe-conduct for Hashim to return to Brunei. Most importantly the Sultan wrote and sealed a document confirming James's position as Rajah of Sarawak. The following year the Sultan agreed that this should be in perpetuity for James and his heirs.

When visiting Singapore in 1843 James heard of an expedition to be mounted against the Borneo pirates and persuaded the Commander, Captain, later Admiral of the Fleet, Henry Keppel, to take him aboard his flagship *HMS Dido* and sail to Sarawak to confront the Iban pirates of the Saribas River. The pinnacle of *HMS Dido*, James's new gun launch the *Jolly Bachelor* and assorted Dayak prahus, with a total of 700 men, sailed up the river and suppressed three pirate villages. James showed mercy to the defeated Dayaks and thereby gained considerable prestige. This was typical of the benign form of government that James practised as Rajah. During 1844 more gung-ho adventures followed to counter the Philippines-based Illanum pirates with James fighting alongside Royal Navy vessels. Makota was banished, Hashim finally left for Brunei and James was left supreme. For the next two years trade flourished and James ensured the Dayaks received their fair share of the profits. In 1846 Henry Keppel published some of James's journals in London and they became a great success with James elevated to the status of a national hero.

In the same year, with the connivance of the Sultan, a faction opposed to Rajah Muda Hashim, claimed his title and attacked and killed him and his wider family. The Royal Navy intervened, destroyed the bases of the usurpers and restored the Sultan. James, who had been in the thick of the fighting, was again confirmed as Rajah and the British took possession of the island of Labuan off Brunei.

James returned to England arriving on 2 October 1847. Three weeks later he was invited to Windsor by Queen Victoria. He was also made a Freeman of the City of London, an Honorary Doctor of Laws at Oxford and was honoured by a dinner at his old school from which he had run away. The Governorship of Labuan, the Consul-Generalship of Borneo and a salary of £2000 a year followed - and finally a knighthood. Sir James Brooke had arrived! After gaining his knighthood, James decided he needed an heir and duly appointed the eldest son of his sister Emma, John Brooke Johnson, who changed his name by deed poll to John Brooke Johnson Brooke to be known as Brooke Brooke. Brooke was not given the title Rajah Muda until 1861 and until then he was known as Tuan Besar or *High Lord*.

In 1848 James returned to Sarawak on *HMS Meander* captained by Keppel. Also on board were Spencer St John, James' first biographer, and another son of his sister Emma, Charles Johnson. There followed a period of relative peace and improved trading until in 1849 Iban from the Saribas river began raiding coastal villages and killing hundreds of villagers. By July James had assembled a large fleet comprising a Royal Navy flotilla, gunboats and a hundred prahus. The Iban boats were successfully ambushed, 500 pirates were killed and a further 500 died of wounds. Though James allowed 1500 more to escape, the battle became a *cause célèbre* in the British Parliament with a group of radical Liberals, including Joseph Hume and Richard Cobden accusing James of massacring innocent tribesmen.

Later in 1854, a Court of Enquiry in Singapore reached no firm conclusions but the stress of years of petitioning and argument took a toll on James's health.

In another of his roles, as Consul-General, James visited Siam in 1850 to arrange a commercial treaty, but was unsuccessful. Spencer St John relates that some ten years later James was involved, through the Borneo Company, in arrangements that secured Anna Leonowens as governess for the children of Mongkut, the new King of Siam, events that inspired the historical travesty of *The King and I*.

Charles Johnson, James' nephew, was seconded from the Royal Navy to the Sarawak Government in 1852 when he changed his name to Brooke and became a regional administrator. He was soon embroiled in a new outbreak of piracy led by a chieftain called Rentap and spent the next nine years fighting him up remote river valleys, through jungle and across mountain ranges. Meanwhile, James had caught smallpox which weakened him considerably. When recovered he visited the new Sultan Abdul Mumin and petitioned successfully to annex another swathe of Sarawak in 1853.

Alfred Russel Wallace who, independently of Darwin, conceived the theory of evolution through natural selection, visited Sarawak in 1855. He spent time collecting plant and animal specimens and became a great admirer of James who was himself an amateur naturalist. Wallace identified many new species including a butterfly he named Raja Brooke's Birdwing which can be identified on a stained-glass window in Sheepstor Church.

In the mid-1850s there was significant immigration of Chinese workers: farmers, traders and especially gold miners. There were also present criminal elements of the Triad, founded in China in the 17th Century. In 1857 a large armed force of Chinese attacked the European Quarter in Kuching burning houses and massacring men, women and children. James only escaped with his life by diving into the river and swimming to safety. The Chinese declared themselves the new rulers but decided to withdraw with booty after hearing of the approach of Charles and his Dayak warriors. They then made the tactical error of returning to burn the Malay Quarter and were confronted by the gunboat *Sir James Brooke* and Charles's prahu. They were routed with 3-4000 being killed or wounded.

James returned to England and renewed his acquaintance with Angela Burdett-Coutts whom he had met briefly during his time in Bath. She was the granddaughter of Thomas Coutts the banker and the richest heiress in England. Some historians believe that she was in love with James and even proposed to him, unsuccessfully. She was a great philanthropist and was very moved by James's accounts of the oppressed Dayaks. It is certainly true that she supported him financially in his Sarawak ventures by advancing substantial loans. In 1871 she became the first woman to be made a Baroness in her own right. For many years she lived in Meadfoot in Torquay, then at Ehrenburg House in Chelston Avenue. After her death, it became the Rosetor Hotel which was demolished to make way for the town's conference centre.

In 1858 aged 55 James had a stroke which did not entirely incapacitate him and the next year, with financing from Burdett-Coutts, he was able to buy the country cottage he yearned for – Burrator. This was 40 years before the building of the reservoir.

*My little 'Box' - that is to be – is snugly situated under Dartmoor – a stream babbles close at hand – wood in plenty and it boasts 72 acres of land. I might have searched for ten years without meeting a place within my limits so retired, so near the world and so suited in all respects to my tastes. I have in a week's stay derived great benefit from the bracing and*

*elastic air and I take my daily ride and walk, to distances I little thought ever to have accomplished again. Yesterday I was five hours on pony-back on the Moor.*

With Sarawak suffering an economic depression and James's, feeling older and often unwell, he began to consider the future, even the sale of Sarawak to another country, and abdication. Brooke Brooke fearing his own inheritance returned to England and some strain developed in his relationship with his uncle. It was Burdett-Coutts who persuaded James to reconsider through a loan of £5000 and the purchase of a new gunboat the *Rainbow*.

In 1861, the next region of Sarawak, the sago producing hinterland of the port of Mukah, was annexed. The same year Charles finally defeated Rentap and from that date there were few Dayak rebellions. Perhaps encouraged by the positive turn of events James finally granted Brooke the title of Rajah Muda.

James returned to Burrator to enjoy some simple farming raising ponies, chickens, ducks and geese and much to the disapproval of his friends began to entertain unsuitable young men ostensibly to train for service in Sarawak. Once again, he began to consider divesting himself of Sarawak. Meanwhile, Brooke had a great success in finally defeating the Illanum pirates at the Battle of Mukah. But after this Brooke received confirmation of James's new plans to dispose of Sarawak and became incensed. He wrote a challenging letter to James and letters to the British Government signing himself *Rajah*. In a rage, James disinherited Brooke and appointed Burdett-Coutts as his heir before sailing back to Sarawak with Charles. Brooke Brooke climbed down and returned to England whilst Charles went on another expedition with 300 prahus to pacify the Kayan tribe on the headwaters of the Rejang river, meeting with complete success. Brooke began to plead his case again but was rebuffed by Burdett-Coutts and by James who signed a formal document disinheriting him and his heirs for ever. Charles was appointed governor.

James returned to England for the last time, hearing *en voyage* that the British Government had at last recognised Sarawak as a sovereign state. He lived for a further five years at Burrator often involving himself in the community affairs of Sheepstor. Though he had often been known as Tuan Muda, Charles had the title conferred formally in 1865. James was still considering giving control of Sarawak to another country when he had a stroke in 1867 and another in 1868. He died on 6 June and was buried at Sheepstor on 11 June. Brooke Brooke also died in 1868, a broken man, but did not get lie with his uncle at Sheepstor and is buried at Whitelackington.

Sir James Brooke was a great man with faults and weaknesses but with a burning sense of justice. He loved his people and was loved by them. He was a man of integrity who always supported and protected the weaker tribes whilst never seeking personal gain. He was more of a liberal than his British detractors who called themselves Liberals. He is still revered in Sarawak as the founder of the nation.

Charles had joined his uncle in Sarawak at a very young age and quickly showed his abilities as a courageous fighter and skilled administrator. He was stern, disciplined, energetic, direct and autocratic, but also radical and far-sighted. During his reign of 50 years from 1868-1917 he was a great friend to the Dayaks but an implacable opponent of head-hunting, confiscating any heads captured from a tribe returning from a feud. In 1869 he married a second cousin 20 years his junior, Margaret de Windt. The new Ranee took to her life in Sarawak with great enthusiasm but endured early tragedy when she lost her three infant children to fever when voyaging to England. She had three more sons, Vyner, Bertram and

Harry and subsequently retired to England where she set up her own social circle, seeing little of Charles.

In the early years, Charles lived frugally and in 1871 repaid the money loaned by Burdett-Coutts. He worked extremely hard hearing petitions, presiding in the courthouse and supervising road and factory construction. Once the financial situation in Sarawak had improved, he began to enjoy entertaining lavishly.

*In the great dining-room lit by hanging oil lamps, with Dayaks waving palm leaves beside each guest, the table laden with silver and crystal, he entertained. These dinners were as formal as the dinner as kings. On more important occasions he would appear for dinner in his full regalia, wearing his green and gold uniform, his chest blazing with decorations.*

In 1888, Queen Victoria knighted Charles and Sarawak was recognised as a fully independent State under the protection of Great Britain.

Charles continued to deal with Dayak rebellions, pirates, cholera, plague, floods and droughts. As the century's end drew closer Charles became very aware of the inevitable demise of Empire and the rise of nationalism. He despised the exploitative imperialism he saw in India and Africa and claimed that his approach was wholly in the interest of his people. As he grew older, he spent more of each year in England at his home in Cirencester, Burdett having been sold in 1877, and left Vyner or Bertram to handle affairs in Sarawak.

In 1911 at the age of 82, he was thrown from his horse and lost an eye which he replaced subsequently with one of the glass eyes he bought from a taxidermist, either leopard, tiger or bear depending on his mood.

At 86 he left Sarawak for the last time and although he had envisaged his two eldest sons sharing power, he named Vyner as his successor. He died in London on 17 May 1917 aged 87, and despite his wish to be buried in Sarawak, he lies in Sheepstor churchyard in a massive rough granite sarcophagus.

Charles had taken on a troubled country and turned it into a well-run prosperous state with a significant surplus income. He had extended the territory four times in 1882, 1884, 1890 and 1903 leaving Brunei as the tiny state it is today.

Vyner Brooke was educated in Winchester and Cambridge and did not serve in Sarawak until 1897 when he was 23. For 26 years as Rajah Muda, he had taken increasing responsibility for the governance of Sarawak as military leader, administrator and chief justice. Under his guidance the economy was improving and in 1909 oil was discovered which added significantly to the country's wealth. In 1911 he was taken ill with a liver abscess and returned to England to convalesce. Upon recovering he decided to marry his intermittent companion of eight years, Sylvia Brett, the daughter of Lord Elgin. In 1927 Vyner was knighted by King George V.

During Vyner's rule, Sarawak was a stable and prosperous unitary state which suited him well as he was a man of peace, humanity and compassion. Unlike his father, he disliked pomp and ceremony and worked hard to reconcile the centralised bureaucracy that had grown up in Kuching, with the traditional paternalistic rule of the divisional officers who enjoyed considerable autonomy. Despite his realisation that the rule of the Rajahs could not continue for ever, he resisted, Sarawak becoming a British Crown Colony. He favoured instead offering a more constitutional form of government to Sarawak and took steps to

achieve this in 1941, the Centenary Year of Brooke rule. External events, however, intervened for in the same year the Japanese invaded and occupied Sarawak. During the occupation, the Japanese badly mistreated the Dayaks and other ethnic groups, Most Europeans had left and Vyner was in Australia from where he returned to London in 1942. He felt, and was, powerless. Sarawak was liberated by the Australians in 1945 and by then Vyner had decided that Brooke rule should end. In February 1946 he issued a proclamation from London urging his subjects to accept British rule.

There was much opposition to cession from significant numbers of Dayaks and Malays as well as from Bertram the Tuan Muda, and Bertram's son Anthony who had been appointed Rajah Muda in 1937. Brooke rule ended nonetheless on 1 July 1946. Vyner retired to London and died on 9 May 1963, Bertram in 1965. Both are buried at Sheepstor. On 22 July 1963, Sarawak was granted self-government by the British and subsequently became one of the founding members of Malaysia, established on 16 September 1963.

Anthony was now the titular Rajah but only recognised as a pretender by a few loyalists. He died in 2011 aged 98. Anthony's grandson, Jason, who was born in 1985, lives part-time in Sarawak promoting the country's heritage, developing the Brooke Gallery, housed in Fort Margherita Kuching since 2016, and tirelessly digitising the Brooke archives which are vast.

The story of the Brookes is unique - if written as a drama it would be deemed improbable. But it has certainly inspired attempts at dramatisation, the first a film script written by Sylvia Brooke in the 1930s. Errol Flynn was to have starred as James but he wanted a *love interest* – Sylvia refused and the film was not made. The second attempt has been more successful and in May 2020 the film *The Edge of the World* premièred in Cannes with Jonathan Rhys Meyers as James. The promoter has described it as a *big, swashbuckling romantic adventure*. Another historical travesty!

The Brooke family ruled Sarawak for 100 years. And now the Rajahs, after their extraordinary lives, lie at rest in Devon in Sheepstor churchyard. If anyone has aspirations to rule a country, a full account of the Brooke family's history is recommended as essential reading!

## **Epilogue**

Early in 2022 I read that Anthony Brooke's grandson, Jason, had bought Burrator House and its 34 acres and was living there, the first Brooke to do so for 154 years. I decided to go to see him and received a warm welcome. He explained that he intended to restore the house to its appearance in the time of Sir James Brooke and that he would set up an archive and museum there and open it to visitors on a limited basis. Very kindly he agreed to host a visit by the West Dart History Group, and on 5 July 2022, 20 members enjoyed a talk from him on the recent history of his family. He also accompanied us on a tour of the gardens and on to Sheepstor Church to see the tombs and graves of his ancestors. It was an extraordinary, almost surreal day and we all felt that we had walked with history.

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