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William Marsden
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The History of Sumatra

William Marsden (1754–1836) spent his youth working for the East India Company in Sumatra, arriving at sixteen and returning to seek new opportunities in England at twenty-five. Through his acquaintance with Sir Joseph Banks, and his interest in oriental studies, which later led to his admittance to the Royal Society, Marsden was inspired to write an account of the island. His history was first published in 1783. Throughout his subsequent life he combined research and writing, especially on oriental languages and numismatics, and he was also First Secretary to the Admiralty at the time of the Battle of Trafalgar. Displaying a profound understanding of the local flora, fauna, history and people, Marsden provides an important account of a little-known part of Indonesia. Illustrated with botanical drawings, maps and local scenes, the third edition of 1811 is reissued here.

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THE
HISTORY OF SUMATRA,
CONTAINING AN ACCOUNT OF
THE GOVERNMENT, LAWS, CUSTOMS, AND MANNERS
OF
THE NATIVE INHABITANTS,
WITH
A DESCRIPTION OF THE NATURAL PRODUCTIONS,
AND A RELATION OF THE
ANCIENT POLITICAL STATE OF THAT ISLAND.

BY
WILLIAM MARSDEN, F.R.S.

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P R E F A C E.

THE island of SUMATRA, which, in point of situation and extent, holds a conspicuous rank on the terraqueous globe, and is surpassed by few in the bountiful indulgences of nature, has in all ages been unaccountably neglected by writers; insomuch, that it is at this day less known, as to the interior parts more especially, that the remotest island of modern discovery; although it has been constantly resorted to by Europeans for some centuries, and the English have had a regular establishment there for the last hundred years. It is true that the commercial importance of Sumatra has much declined. It is no longer the Emporium of Eastern riches, whither the traders of the West resorted with their cargoes, to exchange them for the precious merchandise of the Indian Archipelago: nor does it boast now the political consequence it acquired, when the rapid progress of the Portuguese successes there first received a check. That enterprising people, who caused so many kingdoms to shrink from the terroure of their arms, met with nothing but disgrace in their attempts against Achin, whose monarchs made them tremble in their turn. Yet still the importance of this island, in the eye of the natural historian, has continued undiminished, and has equally, at all periods, laid claim to an attention, that does not appear, at any, to have been paid to it.

The Portuguese being better warriors than philosophers, and more
A 2 eager

eager to conquer nations than to explore their manners or antiquities, it is not surprising that they should have been unable to furnish the world with any particular and just description of a country which they must have regarded with an evil eye. The Dutch were the next people from whom we had a right to expect information. They had an early intercourse with the island, and have at different times formed settlements in almost every part of it; yet they are almost silent with respect to its history.* But to what cause are we to ascribe the remissness of our own countrymen, whose opportunities have been equal to those of their predecessors or cotemporaries? It seems difficult to account for it; but the fact is, that, excepting a short sketch of the manners prevailing in a particular district of the island, published in the Philosophical Transactions of the year 1778, not one page of information respecting the inhabitants of Sumatra has been communicated to the public by any Englishman who has resided there.

To form a general and tolerably accurate account of this country and its inhabitants, is a work attended with great and peculiar difficulties. The necessary information is not to be procured from the people themselves, whose knowledge and inquiries are to the last degree confined, scarcely extending beyond the bounds of the district where they first drew breath; and but very rarely have the almost impervious woods of
Sumatra

* At the period when this remark was written, I was not aware that an account of the Dutch settlements and commerce in Sumatra, by M. Adolph Eschels-kroon, had in the preceding year been published at Hamburgh, in the German language; nor had the transactions of a literary society, established at Batavia, whose first volume appeared there in 1779, yet reached this country. The work, indeed, of Valentyn, containing a general history of the European possessions in the East Indies, should have exempted a nation to which oriental learning is largely indebted, from what I now consider as an unmerited reflection.

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Sumatra been penetrated, to any considerable distance from the sea coast, by Europeans, whose observations have been then imperfect; trusted perhaps to memory only; or if committed to paper, lost to the world by their deaths. Other difficulties arise from the extraordinary diversity of national distinctions, which, under a great variety of independent governments, divide this island in many directions; and yet not from their number merely, nor from the dissimilarity in their languages or manners, does the embarrassment entirely proceed: the local divisions are perplexed and uncertain; the extent of jurisdiction of the various princes is inaccurately defined; settlers from different countries, and at different periods, have introduced an irregular, though powerful influence, that supersedes in some places the authority of the established governments, and imposes a real dominion on the natives, where a nominal one is not assumed. This, in a course of years, is productive of innovations that destroy the originality and genuineness of their customs and manners, obliterate ancient distinctions, and render confused the path of an investigator.

These objections, which seem to have hitherto proved unsurmountable with such as might have been inclined to attempt the history of Sumatra, would also have deterred me from an undertaking apparently so arduous, had I not reflected, that those circumstances in which consisted the principal difficulty, were in fact the least interesting to the public, and of the least utility in themselves. It is of but small importance to determine with precision, whether a few villages on this or that particular river belong to one petty chief or to another; whether such a nation is divided into a greater or lesser number of tribes; or which of two neighbouring powers originally did homage to the other for its title. History is only to be prized as it tends to improve our knowledge of mankind, to which such investigations contribute in a very small degree.

I have

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I have therefore attempted rather to give a comprehensive, than a circumstantial description of the divisions of the country into its various governments; aiming at a more particular detail, in what respects the customs, opinions, arts, and industry of the original inhabitants, in their most genuine state. The interests of the European powers who have established themselves on the island; the history of their settlements, and of the revolutions of their commerce, I have not considered as forming a part of my plan; but these subjects, as connected with the accounts of the native inhabitants, and the history of their governments, are occasionally introduced.

I was principally encouraged to this undertaking by the promises of assistance I received from some ingenious, and very highly esteemed friends, who resided with me in Sumatra. It has also been urged to me here in England, that as the subject is altogether new, it is a duty incumbent on me, to lay the information I am in possession of, however defective, before the public, who will not object to its being circumscribed, whilst its authenticity remains unimpeachable. This last quality is that which I can with the most confidence take upon me to vouch for. The greatest portion of what I have described, has fallen within the scope of my own immediate observation; the remainder is either matter of common notoriety to every person residing in the island, or received upon the concurring authority of gentlemen, whose situation in the East India Company's service, long acquaintance with the natives, extensive knowledge of their language, ideas, and manners, and respectability of character, render them worthy of the most implicit faith that can be given to human testimony.

I have been the more scrupulously exact in this particular, because my view was not, ultimately, to write an entertaining book, to which
the

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the marvellous might be thought not a little to contribute, but sincerely and conscientiously to add the small portion in my power, to the general knowledge of the age; to throw some glimmering light on the path of the naturalist; and more especially to furnish those philosophers, whose labours have been directed to the investigation of the history of Man, with facts to serve as *data* in their reasonings, which are too often rendered nugatory, and not seldom ridiculous, by assuming as truths, the misconceptions, or wilful impositions of travellers. The study of their own species is doubtless the most interesting and important that can claim the attention of mankind; and this science, like all others, it is impossible to improve by abstract speculation, merely. A regular series of authenticated facts is what alone can enable us to rise towards a perfect knowledge in it. To have added one new and firm step in this arduous ascent, is a merit of which I should be proud to boast.



Of this third edition it is necessary to observe, that the former two having made their appearance so early as the years 1783 and 1784, it would long since have been prepared for the public eye, had not the duties of an official situation occupied for many years the whole of my attention. During that period, however, I received from my friends abroad various useful, and, to me at least, interesting communications, which have enabled me to correct some inaccuracies, to supply deficiencies, and to augment the general mass of information on the subject of an island still but imperfectly explored. To incorporate these new materials requiring that many liberties should be taken with the original contexture of the work, I became the less scrupulous of making further alterations, wherever I thought they could be introduced with advantage

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tage. The branch of natural history in particular I trust will be found to have received much improvement, and I feel happy to have had it in my power to illustrate several of the most interesting productions of the vegetable and animal kingdoms by engravings executed from time to time, as the drawings were procured, and which are intended to accompany the volume in a separate atlas.

ERRATA.

Page	45	line	20	for	line, read lime.
	98		22		sukan, r. sukun.
	107		9		daum, r. daun.
	154		1		styrax, r. styrax.
	157	ult.			area, r. areca,
	161		29		payu, r. puhn.
			32		kyau, r. kayu.
	307	Note.			potentella, r. potentilla.
	355		5		Awal ed-din, r. Ala ed-din.



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