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## “SO STRANGE, NOVEL AND FASCINATING”: MARGARET BROOKE, RANEE OF SARAWAK.

They mounted the landing stage at Kuching with great fanfare, the Rajah leading a procession through the bazaar under the traditional yellow satin umbrella carried by the ancient Subu, Umbrella Bearer and Executioner to the State of Sarawak. Carrying the umbrella was Subu's only task, as there was no call for executions in the Brooke Raj. Excitement rose as the party stepped onto the green barge presented to the first Rajah, Sir James Brooke (1803–68), by the King of Siam, to be carried to the river mouth where the Rajah's yacht lay at anchor. It was September 1873. The present Rajah, Charles Brooke, and his young Ranee, Margaret, were making their first return visit to England with their children, a girl, Ghita, aged two and a half, and twin baby boys, James and Charles. The omens had been good for their departure, dispelling the muttering in the bazaar and kampong that twins were unlucky, especially since two months before their birth there had been an eclipse of the sun. Nothing, however, could dispel the unease caused by the new English nurse, who was seen to be cross-eyed. Later it became known that the native amah had stolen and brought on board some small idol, and, so it was said, put a curse on the Ranee and her family.

Before boarding the P&O liner for London the Rajah and Ranee had been feted in Singapore, and had managed to get the children photographed despite a raging cholera epidemic. But as the ship lay becalmed in the stultifying heat of the Red Sea the children shrivelled, withered to nothing and died, over a period of six days. James died on October 11th, Ghita on the 14th and Charles on the 17th. They were buried at sea. To the twenty-four-year old Margaret Brooke it was too terrible for words. She would never speak of it. In her autobiography, *Good Morning and Good Night* (1934), the event rates only a few painful words. Here was my first clue that in the silences, in the repressed subtext of that story, I might find a very different narrative for the Ranee of Sarawak.

Catatonic with grief, Margaret left the ship at Alexandria with her husband and her brother, Harry de Windt. Her husband sternly took her sightseeing:

... I did my best to be interested in the Pyramids; while the Sphinx (then buried up to its neck in sand) was strangely appealing to me. I spent many hours gazing at the mystery. What did it mean? Why was it put there so many thousand years ago? A sort of terror and ghastly hilarity seems to ooze from its face — and yet, behind it all, cannot one trace kindness? (133)

In London, she tells us, the Rajah was bored and angry at her insistence on buying a winter wardrobe. He bitterly resented her spending any money.

Extraordinary as his attitude towards his wife will appear, it must be remembered that his life had been passed almost entirely in Sarawak. Also, in those days married women had no rights whatever in the disposal of their fortune ... I did have a time! When I now look back on it all I remember with satisfaction that I never confided my monetary troubles to any of my friends. They simply would not have understood such a state of things. I knew my husband's nature and could make proper allowance for him, and I should have felt it disloyal to discuss his queer ideas with anyone, however closely related. He was fond of me and always spoke kindly — sometimes even admiringly — about me to his entourage. And, when all was said and done, it was really very comic! (136-37)

Charles always hated England. He only liked to hunt when visiting. The Brookes rented a house in Wiltshire near where they were married and where Charles could ride with the hounds. By the time winter was over another child was expected:

I went and told Aunt Louie and cried on her shoulder. She was tender and discreet. "Think of your country, my child," she said. "How hopeless it would be if your husband had no heir." And she gently went on talking me into resignation. (139)

Vyner Brooke was born on September 21st 1874. He became the third Rajah and the last, since his cavalier lack of interest in Sarawak led him in 1946 to give away his father's treasured jewel of a country to the British Crown in return for a million pounds, enough to keep his wife and two harum scarum daughters at Ascot and Hollywood, where they liked to play at being exotic eastern princesses. For Margaret, who was passionately attached to Sarawak, Vyner's act would have been the ultimate betrayal. Vyner was a perpetual disappointment to her, and even more to his father, for whom nothing mattered but Sarawak.

In her two autobiographical books, *My Life in Sarawak* (1913) and *Good Morning and Good Night*, Margaret portrays Charles Brooke, the cousin she married on impulse when she was nineteen and he was forty-one, as a stiff-necked, old-fashioned Victorian gentleman, the model of disinterested duty to the childlike people of the exotic world he owned and ruled. His "extremely prosaic attitude to marriage," as she tactfully put it, she explained by his being claimed by Sarawak heart and soul. He had turned up at her mother's house one summer day in June 1869, absurdly out of place in a frock coat and top hat. He stayed with them as a taciturn, silent guest until out of the blue he handed the young Margaret a note which read

With a humble demean  
If the King were to pray  
That You'd be his Queen,  
Would *not* you say *Nay*? (24)

She had barely spoken to him, although she had read his autobiography, *Ten Years in Sarawak*, and was intrigued. Her present existence traipsing around after her distracted, widowed mother bored her rigid and she was looking for more challenge (and status) in her life:

A picture came to my mind of my hitherto useless days — and I wondered. It might be a life of interest to me if I went out to Sarawak. Although the Rajah was silent and reserved I looked upon him as a hero and knew that he was considered kind by all who came under his influence. I thought of his book, his love for the people of Sarawak and the devotion of his subjects to him. My fingers wandered over the keyboard. I looked at him; our eyes met; his were kind and grave. "Well," I said, "I will say 'yes'." Upon which he kissed my hand and asked me not to tell my mother ... He then got up, went out of the room, shut the door and disappeared ... (24-25)

When she eventually was told, Margaret's mother was aghast and incredulous, but Lily de Windt was generally distracted to the point of madness, and didn't care that much what happened to her children. Charles never loved Margaret and she never loved Charles, although I think she tried, but she believed he needed an heir and believed he had sought her out for that reason. She clung tenaciously to this explanation, despite Charles' almost total indifference to her children. Nothing in her experience taught her to read this complex man, just as she could read his book only as an admirable narrative of selfless duty. One of the many poignant elements in this story is that Margaret never saw beyond her recognition that Charles was "an odd fish," never grasped his real self, or her role in his scheme of things.

Charlie Johnson had never expected to become Rajah of Sarawak. His uncle James Brooke had given the nod to his older brother Brooke Johnson (both men changed their name to Brooke in the 1860s). He was entirely in his element as the Tuan Muda, meaning Young Lord, second in succession, unhindered in his control of the jungle interior. From the age of twenty-two he lived as the sole European in remote riverine forts, forging shifting alliances among the head-hunting Dyaks. James Brooke said of him in his introduction to Charles' memoirs, "He is looked upon as chief of all the Sea Dyaks." In fact Charles had all but become a Sea Dyak. He was particularly drawn to these people, who are now known as the Iban, a beautiful, fierce, independent and restless people, with a passion for head-hunting. While the Brookes put it about in England that they were suppressing this repugnant activity in Sarawak, in fact Charles

actively encouraged the practice by sanctioning head-hunting raids against other Dyaks who tried to stay outside the Brookes' sphere of influence. Heads could be taken in his service only. In this way he could marshal a massive, unpaid, and totally uncontrollable army of 10,000–50,000 Iban warriors, the fiercest people in South East Asia. At a moment's notice they would mass in their huge war canoes for punitive raids up river, greatly increasing the Brooke domain and their own head collections. On certain big raids the scale of the murder and devastation was awesome.

The Iban regarded Charles as the supreme warrior chief. No other leader commanded such large and successful war parties; no other leader could boast such a large collection of heads; no other group, let alone individual, could gain and maintain control over such vast tracts of land; and no other man had the charisma that placed him above the dictates of the omens. The Iban were controlled by the omens of the natural world, most especially by the birds. Charles transcended even this strict cosmology. "You are our bird," they said, "We follow you." And no wonder. His missionary contemporary, Boyle, said of Charles, "He has collected a quantity of forfeited heads, which are the envy of all neighbouring tribes. These trophies, preserved in the interest of peace and order, are stored in a house on the Sakarran River, which is carefully guarded."

Charles revelled in his unrestrained life. He loved the struggle with the elemental jungle and the raging rivers, the close contact with the magnificent and wild Iban, and the sense of power in directing a flotilla of war canoes; "the glorious independence of it." At the end of his punitive expeditions he would succumb to "a low melancholy." There were times he almost forgot how to speak English, and felt deeply alienated whenever he was required to go to the Brooke capital at Kuching. He despised European society and felt at home only among his Dyak and Malay associates up river. As a recent historian has noted, "more than any other major figure in colonial history, he became and remained a creature of his eastern experience, a child, in every sense, of Sarawak." As Charles tried to explain to the Bishop of Sarawak, "I know the Dyak mind and feeling much better than I do my own brothers and countrymen. This is a part of my nature and will be for all time."

Still, elements of both worlds could merge incongruously, as with the carefully tended rose garden behind his fort at Simanggang, or in the accounts he gave of his punitive raids, such as one in 1862 where he describes himself, having bathed in clear streams, sitting on a rock rattling off his favourite aria from Tosca while his Iban were at work dragging their war canoes over the rapids. He always gave orders, hopeless he knew, to spare the women and children. To the Iban a head was a head; they did not discriminate. I especially like his account of returning from one horrendous expedition, bathed and changed

into light clothes and was just settling down to read Byron's *Childe Harold* with a glass of sherry only to bewhen he was disturbed by two Iban warriors fighting over a dripping head which one held aloft. Such accounts as this the young Margaret seems to have missed, or utterly misread.

Before his death in 1868 James Brooke disinherited his eldest nephew, Brooke Brooke, and only weeks before he died he finally settled on Charles as his heir. Charles was devoted to Sarawak, but was unprepared to assume the massive debt his uncle bequeathed. Luckily, James had considered what to do about this worrisome debt, giving his nephew instructions to travel to England to seek out his cousin Lily de Windt. James informed Charles that Lily, two years Charles's senior, was a wealthy widow and that Charles should marry her. Lily may well have received a proposal from Charles during his stay, but she would have paid it no attention, since she was ill and almost mad since the loss of her husband. Not knowing anyone in England, Charles turned to her good-looking daughter, whom he knew also had bequests from both her father and her aristocratic French grandmother. As it turned out, Margaret never had as much money as Charles had expected and he never ceased to berate her for the money she spent.

Once in Sarawak Margaret never seemed to grasp what Charles was about, with his continual trips up river. She usually accompanied him for only the first part of his trips, so she never saw or even guessed the carnage which might be involved. On rare she occasions went into the deep interior, such as the time she accompanied him up the remote Baram river in 1875. Her colourful account is telling:

Lo and behold! the landing stage was filled with Kayan warriors, the Chief and his men ranged along the bank on either side of the climbing-pole. And how picturesque they did look, bristling with swords, spears, feathered caps, tigers' teeth; tattooed on legs and arms, be-bangled and hung with beads. I thought them beautiful and loved them all. As we stepped on shore the Rajah, with an impressive wave of the arm, ordered the boat, its entire crew, also the armed guard, back to the "Sri Sarawak." "No guard whatever, Rajah"? Inquired Mr de Crespigny, as the boat receded from the shore. "A sign that we trust them absolutely," said my husband, as the rifles were borne off on the stream. After they had saluted each other, the Chief led the way up the bamboo, followed by the Rajah. Then my turn came. Oh dear, another such a getting upstairs! Seeing my rueful expression, two beautiful young Kayan warriors came forward and offered me a hand. They were so graceful and charming I did my very best. They smiled sweetly at each effort I made to turn out my toes to the required position. They reminded me of Pan and other sylvan gods I had read about in fairy tales. When we reached the top each one deposited my hand back by my side with a courtly gesture. So many years gone by since then, and I can see them now! How I enjoyed it all, so strange, novel and fascinating was the scene I had been pushed into! (154-55)

These Kayan warriors were just as fierce and dangerous as the Iban, but they were claimed as subjects of the Sultan of Brunei, which is why Charles was paying them a visit. He sought to extend his control over them and their extensive territory. In doing so, he no doubt wished to remind them, however subtly, of what happened to their relatives during the great Kayan expedition twelve years earlier, when twenty-five long houses were reduced to cinders feet deep, and many thousands were killed. Even today the Kayan have not recovered from this bloody encounter, the Borneo equivalent of the Highland Clearances. Charles wanted Kayan allegiance. He knew how important women were in Dyak society and b. By using his unwitting wife as an emissary he was able to cloak his punitive intentions in feminine softness. Margaret was a great hit with Dyak and Malay alike. She was useful to him in this way on a great many occasions.

Usually she travelled no further than the fort at Simanggang where she was very taken with the young European resident, Harry Skelton, who every morning made her a special breakfast tray containing flowers he had picked and made into a posy. During her taciturn husband's many absences she and young Skelton very much enjoyed each other's company, taking long evening walks beside the river. After his premature death, in 1873, Skelton's place was taken by another gallant charmer of her own age, Frank Maxwell, but Margaret's romantic inclinations towards him were rudely jolted when she arrived unexpected to find a beautiful Dyak girl in the room he had prepared for her husband's use:

Then he came up to me. "Oh, Ranee, don't tell the Rajah," he said. "What do you take me for?" said I, dignified as ever in quiet and witty repartee! The maiden ran out and I saw her no more. (189)

This is a fascinating aside, since by the time of this encounter, in 1876, Margaret Brooke was well aware that her husband actually encouraged his officers to have liaisons with local women. In fact he forbade them to marry European women and dismissed them if they did. Both Frank Maxwell and Claude de Crespigny, the young men with whom Margaret liked to flirt and entertain the romantic frisson so denied by her husband, had long-standing open relationships with Dyak women whom they treated as their wives. Their descendants are well known in Sarawak society today. Margaret also knew that Charles had numerous native mistresses. As she confessed to her nephew in 1927, she had discovered this on her very first trip to Simanggang when the Malay women told her of his harem. "They thought such conduct rather fine," she exclaimed, adding that he was also very possessive of his women. She gave her nephew this account of his treatment of one woman who had an affair with a fortman:

He found out about it, he was furious. He had her head shaved and tied the thick long tail of her hair to the flagstaff! Then she was put in a boat, shaven and shorn and paddled to and fro in front of the Kampong, with a man who summoned all the people to the bank with a gong and informed the populace of her misdeeds. In a way he was a queer fish.

Again, had she paid attention to his autobiography, she would have known from the outset that Charles was not just a queer fish, but a man of unusual racial views. His two-volume book concludes astoundingly with a long exposition of his views of mixed marriage: "It is my conviction that a time will arrive when from a modification of the races, resulting from intermixture and amalgamation through marriage, a kind of inhabitant will be found who can make such a country their permanent home ..."

Rejecting "fantastic notions and prejudices" of racial superiority, Charles insisted that Europeans will always be "mere interlopers in these waters" and the future rulers of Sarawak would be the offspring of European and Native races. He concludes his book by saying "As Disraeli says, what is the nature of man? In every clime in every creed we shall find a new definition."

The naive Margaret had not been able to read this aspect of Charles when she met him, but she found out soon enough. Very soon after her arrival she discovered Charles's son, a child named Esca, two years old, living at the fort at Simanggang with all the trappings of the Rajah's son. His mother was a high-caste Malay/Iban woman, Dayang Mastiah, the daughter of Charles' closest and most influential advisor. Many years later Margaret tried to pass off the Rajah's first wife as "a low Malay," just another mistress, and deny she had married Charles, but it is inconceivable that Charles could have taken the daughter of a Malay Datu as his mistress. Moreover at the time of their marriage, in 18664, Charles was desperately forging alliances with Malay leaders, having been greatly unsettled by a Malay plot against the Brooke Raj a few years earlier. His success in reestablishing Brooke authority owed much to the powerful influence of Abang Aing. Dayang Mastiah was the daughter of Abang Aing. A marriage to her would have helped cement these alliances for him.

In retrospect, Margaret says of the boy Esca that she "had the nous to see he might be a bore in the country" and contrived to send him away. Esca was more than a bore, he was a fundamental threat to her whole existence. The position of Rajah was established by the Islamic codes of the Malay aristocracy, not by the English Crown. Christian marriage had no special significance in Sarawak. In later correspondence Margaret would insist this first born son was

illegitimate, but in fact her own children held no automatic precedence over this child with his powerful Sarawak connections.

Margaret seems to have accepted him into her household. In 1872 he was baptised by the missionary Rev Crossland. I have seen the baptismal certificate, but can find no direct reference in Crossland's reports to the missionary society. An absolute conspiracy of silence has all but eliminated Esca Brooke from the historical record. In a deposition that Esca himself made to the British Government in 1947, he recalls growing up at the Astana with his father and stepmother, and mentions the birth of his sister and stepbrothers. He also remembers that in 1873 he and the other children were taken to England. He was photographed, as were the other children, during his stay in Singapore, before the family boarded the P&O liner. He remembered too that all four children were stricken with fever and that he alone survived.

When the Rajah and Ranees disembarked at Alexandria, Esca continued on with an English servant and a Dyak companion. He was taken by a friend of James Brooke's to the family's intended destination, the Rajah's house at Sheepstor on Dartmoor, where he was looked after by the Reverend Daykin, who lived next door. He never saw or heard from his father again. Instead of proceeding to Sheepstor Charles and Margaret rented a house in Wiltshire. Charles kept the house at Sheepstor for another ten years, but he never lived there again. In 1875 the Reverend Daykin was made archdeacon of Natal and took Esca to South Africa. They returned to Sheepstor in 1877 but left for good the following year. In 1884 Daykin went as a missionary to Canada, taking Esca, now known as his son, with him. A regular allowance of one hundred pounds was paid to Daykin and was later transferred to Esca.

Esca Brooke Daykin had a successful life in Canada, and he kept quiet about his relatives until he was in his late sixties. But he wrote many letters to his father and later to his stepbrothers seeking some recognition or contact. Only Margaret Brooke replied. His stepmother, he says, wrote him kind letters, and in later life sent presents to his wife and children, but these letters "contained no explanation of the prolonged silence on the part of my father." One letter remains, written bitterly in 1896 explaining to Esca that, like him, she and her younger sons had been cut out of Charles Brooke's life.

This much I know from the documents and letters I have been able to find. I can only assume that it was the grief-stricken Margaret who insisted that the Brookes take a house in Wiltshire near where she had previously lived rather than go to damp Sheepstor which she loathed and which was so far away from London and aristocratic society. I believe that in Wiltshire, among her influential friends and family, and faced with the appalling prospect of another preg-

nancy which drove her in tears to her Aunt Louie, Margaret made a contract with her husband. The first born child, the living proof of his passionate union with Sarawak, the child who embodied his living hopes for a hybrid ruling class in Asia, was to be set aside, expunged, got rid of.

Margaret accepted that Charles was bored with her, and contemptuous of her European attitudes and vanities. She accepted that he would ignore her and prefer the company of savages. But she would be the mother of the next Rajah of Sarawak. Charles, perhaps comprehending the depth of her grief, not to mention her very influential friends at court, complied. Following Vyner Brooke's birth Charles secured the documents relating to Esca's birth and baptism and sent these to Daykin. It was not until 1917, after the Rajah's death, that Daykin passed these documents on to his adopted son.

Margaret returned to Sarawak in 1875, leaving her son in England. Her second son Bertram was born in Sarawak the following year. Again I can only assume that in Sarawak it was understood that all four children had died on the tragic sea voyage. Margaret returned to England for longer and longer periods, making only brief trips to Sarawak in the company of her fashionable friends. In her autobiography she talks of having a rare form of malaria, but allows that the doctor diagnosed her recurring illness as "hysteria." It is plainly obvious she cried a lot and was often deeply unhappy. She seems to have finally separated from Charles in 1883. Even in England they kept separate houses, hers in London where she was now hailed as "a leader of society," his in Wiltshire. In 1887 Margaret made a brief trip to Sarawak with her three children and a tutor, after which Charles made it impossible for her to return again, and apart from persistent complaints about her spending money, and correspondence concerning the education of their sons, he barely communicated with her. Against his explicit orders she contrived with her old flame Frank Maxwell to visit Sarawak at her own expense in 1896. Charles promptly left for England giving orders that all her costs for food and lodging be billed to her.

Her children were a perpetual disappointment to him. He regarded them as wastrels without any sense of duty, and he was prepared to accept Vyner, and later Bertram, only if each agreed to live permanently in Sarawak. Margaret he denied any place in Sarawak at all, a cruel blow about which she is uncharacteristically bitter. But Charles too had reason to be bitter. He knew only too well how she had used her connections in England to meddle in Sarawak affairs, explaining to his youngest son Harry:

I dread your mother's methods in England regarding myself and Sarawak, more than any enemy in the West, and I have written about this more than once, but my pen is useless in that direction.

Foreign office correspondence makes it clear that Margaret, who had a very dear friend "well known at the foreign office" as well as friends at court, had been responsible for the curious inclusion of a clause in the treaty between England and Sarawak in 1888 by which Her Majesty's government extended to Sarawak military and diplomatic protection but conceded that such protection conferred "no right to interfere in the internal administration" of Sarawak. Given the consistent refusal of the British to have anything to do with Sarawak's internal affairs or institutions of government, and their reluctance to even support the Raj against external threats, it is odd that the Treaty of 1888 required that any question concerning the right of succession to the present or any future Ruler of Sarawak, must be referred to Her Majesty's Government for decision. Both James Brooke and Charles Brooke had struggled vainly with successive British administrations for forty years to get British protection for Sarawak. That Charles succeeded in 1888, the year following the visit to Sarawak of his estranged wife and three sons, can be attributed in part to Margaret's "methods in England." As Lord Brassey, the architect of the Treaty, pointed out in a personal correspondence to the foreign office, the Ranee was "very concerned to protect the rights of her sons."

There can be no doubt that Margaret Brooke loved Sarawak. Even Charles acknowledged that she cared for Sarawak "more than any person except myself." She certainly cared more for Sarawak than did her sons. He fought hard for them and she spoilt them but they did not repay her as she expected. Her autobiography fails to record that the disappointing heir for whom she drove her hard bargain, Vyner Brooke, conspired with her favourite son Bertram, to keep her out of Sarawak. Vyner wrote to his brother that:

Ma intends coming out here to give instructions to all and sundry the way the place must be run. Needless to say I shall leave for England "instanter." If you back me up and we pull together we can frustrate her knavish tricks, but if you don't I go under as I cannot cope with her. Ma, as much as I admire her, is full of schemes and plots and it is hard to know what she is working at. If the old man pops off I should love you to come out and take over while I'm on leave, turn and turn about ... It would frustrate Ma. She is fully convinced I wish to sell Sarawak, accumulate great wealth for myself and endeavour to get a peerage.

I wonder whether the brothers understood that one of their mother's "schemes and plots" had been to usurp their unknown half-brother and thus ensure their status as tandem rulers of Sarawak following their father's death. Certainly Esca Brooke believed they did understand this, writing bitter letters in his later life describing his half-brothers as rotters who had knowingly defrauded him of his title and his share of Sarawak's wealth. But finally the loss Esca felt most was of a father and a family. In a poignant letter to Vyner in 1928 he says:

My greatest pleasure in life would be to meet a relative (remember I have never met one). That has always been denied me. Claim a relationship no matter what it is. It will give me some peace ... You will be the judge yourself that Esca is not the type to be avoided. I have been bought up a gentleman and will always remain one ... for the sake of the one who was father to both of us ...

He received no reply from Vyner, although Vyner gave instructions to the Sarawak Treasury that Esca's allowance continue to be paid. When the Third Rajah gave Sarawak to England in 1948, in return for a payment of one million pounds, he saw to it that his brother Esca Brooke Daykin received an ex gratia payment of £500.

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