

# FROM GAYA TO JESSELTON: A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A COLONIAL TOWNSHIP

*Danny Wong Tze Ken*

## **Introduction**

One of the questions commonly asked when discussing the history of a particular settlement, town or city is the reason behind the choice of the site. Professor Gordon East offers several possible answers. First, for geographical reasons, including location near a river or water source or fertile lands. Second, for defence and fortification purposes. Third, strategic location for trade and merchant activities. The choice of a particular site could involve all three reasons or a combination of two or even a single reason. Yet, the decision could either ensure the success of a town or doom it even from day one when the site was chosen.<sup>1</sup>

Present-day Kota Kinabalu had its origins in the settlement on Gaya Island, established in 1882, shortly after the North Borneo Company began its rule in North Borneo. Various reasons have been offered to explain the establishment of the new township on the mainland. This paper is an attempt to map the trans-positioning of the settlement from Gaya Island to Gantian on the mainland before final settlement at the present site. Apart from geographical reasons, this paper argues that human decisions and historical events played equally important role in helping in deciding the final location of the township of Jesselton. This project is part of a larger project to study the development of Jesselton and Kota Kinabalu through maps. However, the paper, being exploratory in nature, will be confined to the years between the establishment of the town's predecessor, the Gaya Settlement in 1882 and the foundation of Jesselton in 1899.

After 1899, the town of Jesselton grew as a colonial port town before being destroyed by aerial bombardment during the closing stages of World War II in 1945. The post-war reconstructed town of Jesselton retained much of the original layout. The town became the new state capital, replacing Sandakan, the pre-war capital. The town was renamed Kota Kinabalu in September 1967 and attained city status in 2000.

The approach taken here is to look at the establishment and initial growth of the town through a combination of historical and geographical data – the former chiefly in the form of colonial documents, the latter mainly from maps produced during the period.

## The Search for a Site – Gaya Station 1882

When the North Borneo (Chartered) Company first took over the territory of North Borneo in 1878, it placed its first officials, known then as Residents, in three locations considered strategic to the Company's interests. These three locations were Sandakan on the east coast, Papar and Tempasuk (Ambong) on the west coast. All were chosen because of their original function as native trading centres, reflective of the Company's main concern – encouraging trading activities. Sandakan proved to be a wise choice as the town grew under the pioneering spirit of its able Resident, W. B. Pryer. The town, with its natural deep water port, was also chosen in 1883 to be the capital of North Borneo. Sandakan's success, however, was not equalled by Papar and Ambong. Papar, though a highly populated and prosperous settlement, was found to be too close to Labuan, the British port obtained from Brunei in 1846. Most traders preferred to visit Labuan rather than Papar, rendering the latter redundant.

Ambong too was unable to make an impact and the Company would soon put more emphasis on the more prosperous inland settlement of Kota Belud. Even though Ambong remained the exit point for goods from the area, it too was often by-passed by merchants who preferred to take their goods and wares either to Labuan or, later, to the Company's new administrative centre at Kudat, at the northern tip of the island of Borneo. However, the North Borneo Company still preferred to have at least one main settlement on the west coast to serve as a viable collecting centre for produce from the various points on the coast before transport to larger centres such as Labuan or Sandakan. It was on the basis on such need that a settlement was established on Gaya Island, situated between Labuan and Kudat on the west coast, opposite the site of later-day Jesselton (later renamed Kota Kinabalu).

The settlement on Gaya Island was established in September 1882 on the northeast bay of the island (not facing Jesselton, as is generally believed). The Gaya Island settlement's primary function was to serve as a collecting station for jungle and local produce on the west coast. The station was also a stopping place for European officials plying between Kudat and Labuan. Gaya Island was originally acquired by the North Borneo Company along with several other places on the west coast of North Borneo through an agreement made with the Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Abdul Mumin Ebn Marhoum Maulana Abdul Wahab on 29 December 1877. According to the late Mr. J. H. Macartney, the name Gaya derived from the Bajau word *goyoh*, which means "big". Thus Gaya Island is actually Big Island.<sup>2</sup>

One of the earliest available records concerning the region of present-day Jesselton and its vicinity came from Spenser St. John, who was for many years the British Consul to the Brunei Court. St. John, who had visited the west coast of Sabah en route to Mount Kinabalu in 1858, remarked, "The coast line, as viewed from the sea, presents the following appearance: Gaya Island, and the shores of Gaya, and Sapangar Bays are hilly, and this continues to within a mile of the mouth of the Mengkabong; .... The Ananam (Inanam) in Gaya Bay, and the Kabatuan in Sapangar Bay, are only suited for native craft...."<sup>3</sup>

St. John continues, "There are several bays along this coast which insure complete shelter for shipping. The finest of these harbours is that composed of the two bays Gaya and Sapangar, which is large enough to afford protection during both monsoons for every vessel that trades to the East; it contains within itself minor

harbours, as one on the north-east of Gaya Island, which has thirteen fathoms, and is perfectly safe; while abundance of fresh water may be obtained on its western shore. Lokporin, in Sapangar Bay, is also a secure anchorage. Gantisan, the Malay town on the north-eastern shore, though good for shipping, is not so secure for very small craft....” St. John also made a rough estimate of the native population on the west coast, around the area of present-day Jesselton. According to St. John, there were around 300 Malays and others living at Gaya Bay, 1,000 *Ida’an* in Kabatuan, around 6,000 *Bajau* and 1,000 *Ida’an* living in the Mengkabong area.<sup>4</sup>

The territory that included the area which was to become Jesselton was part of the concession granted by the Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Abdul Mumin, to C. Lee Moses and Joseph W. Torrey on 11 August 1865. The two were American citizens who started a venture called American Trading Company based in Kimanis. When the venture failed to produce the desired results, the concession was sold to Baron von Overbeck, the Austrian Consul-General in Hong Kong. Overbeck, who wanted to develop the concession, then teamed up with an English businessman, Alfred Dent. Together, they set up the Overbeck-Dent Syndicate which tried to attract Austrian investment in developing the concession. When the Austrian government failed to show interest, Overbeck sold his shares to Dent. By then, the syndicate had established some form of rule in three places—Sandakan, Tempasuk and Papar. It was through Dent and his colleagues in London that the concession finally took the form of a British-based territory administered by a Chartered Company.

Gaya Bay on which Jesselton was built was part of the territory that was further signed away by the Brunei Sultanate on 29 December 1877, this time, through Sultan Abdul Mumin Ebn Marhoum Maulana Abdul Wahab, in return for an allowance of \$4,000. The territory included in this agreement was from Gaya Head to Sontut Point, including Sepangar Bay and Sepangar Island. However, the Company never exercise power until it was finally ceded in 1898.

Right from the beginning, Gaya Island was thought to have prospects for becoming a suitable settlement, and a possible port of call. Sir Edward Belcher, who visited Gaya in 1846, thought the island to be “one of the best and most completely land-locked harbours on this coast”.<sup>5</sup>

The main government installations on Gaya Island were the Residency House, the Treasury office and the police station. The Residency, which was situated on the slope of a 170-foot hill at the southern part of the settlement, was only used when the Resident of West Coast was in town. The North Borneo Company established a skeleton administrative set-up by appointing a resident treasury clerk (who also served as revenue collector) whose main task was to keep accounts and to collect taxes. There was also a police station manned by a detachment of policemen under the command of a non-commissioned officer.

Like most settlements at that time, the establishment of the administration was followed closely by the arrival of Chinese merchants who purchased town lots to open shops. Almost all of the original merchants came from Labuan. At the settlement’s height, there were 25 shops on Gaya Island, all made of *atap* and *kajang*. These shops dealt primarily in local produce such as tobacco, rattan, raisins, edible swifts’ nests, dried sea products such as sea slugs and even pearls, all of which were destined for more sophisticated markets in Hong Kong and Singapore. Most of the shopkeepers were either Hokkien or Teochew, though there were also a few Cantonese and Hakka. This was a legacy of the Straits Settlements from where most of these traders originated. There was also a sago factory in the southern area

of the settlement. Branching out from the shophouses was the 350-yard wharf, constructed partly from *nibong*, which extended out to sea to a depth of 21 feet.

The population of Gaya Island, according to the 1886 census, was 479, consisting of Bajau, Brunei Malays, Chinese, Dusun, Somalians, Dyaks and Punjabis, with the majority being Bajau and Chinese.<sup>6</sup> The Somalians, Dyaks and Punjabis made up the ranks of the police force.

A local council set up in 1886 to administer the affairs of the island settlement was led by a President who was also the Resident-in-Charge. The four other members were all Chinese merchants, three seats allocated to those of Hokkien origins and one to the Cantonese from Macao.<sup>7</sup> In a way, the council resembled a Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

Despite the optimistic opinions on the future of the settlement, Gaya did not flourish as expected. Apart from trade and the collection of local produce, other economic activities did not prosper. The soil on the island was found to be infertile, thus agricultural activities could not be carried out fruitfully. Even the sago factory had to be closed shortly after opening for failing to make money. But the main problem behind the failure of the island was the lack of fresh water supply. There were no major streams or rivers on the island, and water supply for the settlement came mainly from the few wells sunk around the settlement, but all these were found to be inadequate even to meet the daily demands of the settlement, let alone provide water for agricultural use. John Whitehead, the author of the earliest book on Mount Kinabalu, was not impressed by what he saw when he visited the Gaya settlement in April 1885:

I do not think that 'Town lots' in Pulo Gaya would be a successful speculation, as year later when I visited the place the shops looked decidedly the worse for wear and had not increased in number. At one time the Chinese opened a small sago factory, but they shortly abandoned this business .... Gaya is, I should think, a most unhealthy place; it is certainly a very hot one, being sheltered from most winds; if a good town site could be chosen on the main island where steamers could touch, it would be a good move to abandon Gaya for more reasons than its unhealthy position."<sup>8</sup>

Whitehead's observation was rather prophetic as he had cast his eyes on having the township built on the mainland rather than on Gaya. Nevertheless, the settlement continued to exist till a raid led by Mat Salleh and a fire in 1897 prompted the North Borneo Company officials to look for an alternative site.

At midnight on 9 July 1897, Mat Salleh led his followers to attack the settlement on Gaya Island. Mat Salleh (Mohamed Salleh) was a chief from the Sugut River on the east coast. He had defied the Chartered Company administration since 1894, which resulted in a series of skirmishes with government troops sent to hunt for him.<sup>9</sup> The raiders retreated from Gaya with loot estimated to be worth \$100,000, and also took with them F. S. Neubronner, the treasury clerk of Eurasian origins. As a result of the raid, the Company pursued Mat Salleh further, and at the same time pressed for compensation from the Sultan of Brunei as some of Mat Salleh's men were from the region of Inanam, Menggatal and Mengkabong which was then still under the jurisdiction of the Sultan of Brunei. The settlement between the Sultan and the Company resulted in the Company acquiring more territorial concessions,

this time on the mainland of Sabah, including Menggatal, Mengkabong, Api Api, Sembulan, Inanam, Kuala Lama, and Membakut.

Mat Salleh's destruction of the Gaya settlement resulted in the need to either rebuild the settlement or to find a new site, one possibly situated on the mainland rather than on an island. This brought about a search for a new site, which eventually ended with the new site of Gantian.

## Gantian 1898

It is generally accepted that the destruction of Gaya by Mat Salleh's men resulted in the settlement being abandoned. However, this is not entirely true as the settlement was not immediately given up. In fact, there were attempts to rebuild the township. The reason for the final abandonment of the Gaya Settlement was actually related to the building of the railway. The railway project that had been started in 1896 had reached a stage where a suitable exit point was needed at the end of the line from Beaufort and Weston.<sup>10</sup> As Gaya is an island, it had to be ruled out, and a new site had to be found on the mainland. With the acquisition of new territories from Brunei, there were many sites to choose from.

Other evidence which discounts the Mat Salleh attack factor as the reason for the Chartered Company abandoning Gaya was the fact that shortly after the attack, the Chartered Company attempted to rebuild the settlement. There is evidence that new buildings were constructed to replace those destroyed during the attack. Dwindle is of the opinion that the attack, "... was not the end of Gaya Town. The administration returned there and erected buildings to replace the burnt ones."<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is possible that during the period between the attack and the decision to establish the Gantian station, the Chartered Company was still hoping to revive the settlement on Gaya Island.

In 1898, William Clarke Cowie, the Managing Director of the North Borneo Company, an old Sabah hand, decided to establish a new township on a strip of land on the northern part of Likas Bay and south of the village of Gantian near the Mengkabong River, six miles up the bay from Gaya Island. Cowie decided to call it Gantian (Replacement). Spenser St. John, the British Consul at the Court of Brunei, had passed through Gantian during his 1858 visit and had remarked that, "Gantian, the Malay town on the north-eastern shore, though good for shipping, is not secure for very small craft, as squalls from the south-west raise rather a heavy sea there. Several coral reefs jut out from the northern shore, with deep water on either side of them. This harbour is the most important in Borneo, from its commanding position in the China seas, and from its great security."<sup>12</sup>

Cowie, who was touring the country at that time, paid a visit to the site and proclaimed the place to be satisfactory. According to Cowie (April 8th) "This is my birthday. It has been celebrated by the formal founding of a new town at the mouth of the Menggatal River. For want of a better name I have called it "Gantian". "Ganti," in Malay, means "to change", and by affixing the "an" to that verb it becomes a proper name, thus somewhat appropriate, indicating the change of the settlement from Gaya Island. ...We drank success, with all the enthusiasm of pioneers, to Gantian, which from its position and surroundings, must become the most important place on the West Coast."<sup>13</sup>

Cowie was of the opinion that it was a mistake to build townships on islands as it would incur higher transportation and labour costs for goods to be transported to the island.<sup>14</sup> It is not known if Cowie's decision was influenced by St. John's earlier assessment. Nevertheless, if Cowie accepted St. John's account, he definitely ignored the part concerning the weaknesses of Gantian and, instead, concentrated on the attributes of the place. Henry Walker, the Land Commissioner, wrote, "Gantian is the only place in Gayah Bay suitable for a township. It has a safe anchorage, sufficient drinking water, which is notoriously short at Gayah, and a magnificent sheet of back land in the Mengkabong plains."<sup>15</sup> The traders also expressed their satisfaction with the new site.

The site was chosen because it is on the mainland, and was situated by the sea across a plain. The name 'Gantian' signified the mood of the day, as it meant 'replacement' for the old settlement on Gaya Island. Buoyed by Cowie's confidence, there was an air of optimism among the Company officials, who thought the place would flourish. Just as on Gaya, almost immediately after the opening of the new township, the Chinese shopkeepers from Gaya Island set up their shops in Gantian while government offices were being planned.

In July 1898, W. A. MacKenzie, the Government Surveyor, reported that he had surveyed the new township of Gantian in Gayah Bay and laid out 32 town lots with sites for the Resident and Treasurer's bungalows and Government Offices including a reserve of flat land for future extension of the town.<sup>16</sup>

Despite all the optimism expressed for the success of the new township, and the many efforts being made to realise it, Gantian failed to take off. There were two major drawbacks. A swampy mangrove near the new township made it too costly to extend the railway, which would also have to cross the Inanam River. After making several surveys, Mr. Tower, one of the engineers working on the project, expressed pessimism over its feasibility. Instead, he proposed an elaborate scheme to build a bridge connecting Gaya to the mainland. According to him, the cost of connecting the railway with Gantian was similar to that of a bridge from the mainland to Gaya Island.<sup>17</sup> Like St. John's findings almost fifty years earlier, Tower found that the shallow waters at Gantian prevented the docking of larger vessels. The new site was also found to be too exposed to wind, making it a port which ships would be a reluctant to call at. There was an urgent need to find a more suitable site.

## **Jesselton 1899**

In 1899, Henry Walker, the Land Commissioner, was asked to look for a suitable site on the mainland to establish a new township and port in place of Gantian. This he found at a site closer to the point the railway line had reached, with a natural deep port, protected from the wind. The strip of land was immediately opposite Gaya Island. The new site had a area of 30 acres with a width of six chains, and a length of about half a mile. The site was also backed by hills that Walker thought might be very suitable for the building of houses for the European officers. But the most important aspects were that it was closer to the end of the railway line and it had a deep natural port (as deep as 24 feet), and was protected from the wind by Gaya Island.

“With a view to supplying a good coast station for the railway proposed to be put in hand along the West Coast from Beaufort, the Commissioner of Lands, Mr. Henry Walker, was recently instructed to inspect the South Channel from Gayah Bay. We now learn that this has resulted in the discovery of a very suitable town site and anchorage on the Coast nearly opposite to old Gayah. Mr. Walker reports that there are about thirty acres of good dry flat land, over six chains wide and half a mile long, available for a town. They lie at the foot of low grassy hills on which there are good bungalow sites and there is good anchorage at a distance of less than half a mile which can be reached by a stone mole and wooden pier. At the T head the depth at low water will be 24 feet, sufficient for ocean-going steamers.”<sup>18</sup>

According to the *Herald* report, Walker’s proposal was accepted and a new township called Jesselton was founded, named after the vice-chairman of the North Borneo Company, Sir Charles Jessel.<sup>19</sup> Jesselton would not have become a township if not for the railway and the rubber that came with it. For, apart from being a new township replacing Gaya, the main *raison d’être* for the establishment of Jesselton was the need to have a suitable exit point for the railway which brought out produce from the interior for export. Earlier attempts of having Weston and Gantian play the role of an exit point failed – and Jesselton nicely fitted that role. The *British North Borneo Herald* of 1 August 1900 described Jesselton’s advantage: “Such a centre for the trade which will be developed by 110 miles of railway terminating at Jesselton cannot fail to attract steamers and population to that port where the anchorage is suitable and safe for all classes of vessels...its position is in every way excellent.”<sup>20</sup>

The idea of starting a railway system in Sabah was first mooted in 1891 by William Clarke Cowie, an old Sabah hand and a shareholder in the North Borneo Company. Like many empire builders of his age, Cowie, who had spent considerable time in Sabah and Labuan, advocated the idea as a means to promote trade and to provide access to the interior. To him, economic development should go hand in hand with the construction of infrastructure, including a railway. This idea was in line with Cowie’s belief that the interior of Sabah was densely populated and that, more importantly, the railway would help to carry agricultural products from the many estates that had been opened, especially on the west coast. Cowie’s idea met with strong opposition from the Board of Directors, who did not have faith in making such a large investment in a territory that had yet to show them any significant profit. It was only in 1895 that the idea finally became a reality after Cowie became the Managing Director of the Company.

To carry out his idea, Cowie approached his friend A. J. West, an engineer who had earlier constructed the short stretch of railway on Labuan Island (from the coal mines to the harbour), to undertake the project. Cowie’s initial plan was to build a trans-North Borneo railway that would link Sandakan Bay on the east coast and Mempakul on the west coast, and also another line to link Sipitang on the west coast and Tawau in the southeast. But when work commenced in 1896, the plan was altered to concentrate on building the railway on the west coast. The first section of 20 miles of railway was opened in 1898, joining the newly opened settlements of Beaufort and Weston. The project had begun with the construction of the Bukau–Padas stretch that ended at the new township of Beaufort, and from

Beaufort it was extended to Weston. It was finally completed in 1900. The manner in which it was built underlined the idea behind the construction of the railway in Sabah, which was to provide an exit point for local produce. The choice of Weston on Brunei Bay was an ideal one at that time as the most important business centre on the west coast was Labuan, so that it was only logical for the railway to end at Weston which was nearer the island.

By 1898, however, Cowie was convinced that Weston was not suitable as the exit point for the railway as the harbour was too shallow for larger vessels to dock. Being a new township, it had also failed to attract settlers. Cowie's option was to extend the railway from Beaufort to Papar but, finally, as discussed above, settled on Gantian. However, as Gantian was also found to be unsuitable, the idea was abandoned and the final terminal point for the railway was to be Jesselton, the new township that was started in 1899 to replace Gaya and Gantian.

The work for the construction of the Beaufort–Jesselton section was given to the firm of George Pauling & Co. This 58-miles section was completed in 1902. In 1905, the 30 miles Beaufort–Tenom section was also completed. The construction of this shorter section was especially tough. Unlike the Beaufort–Jesselton section, which was essentially built along the coastal plain, the Beaufort–Tenom track was built on the edge of the Padas Gorge, and had to cut through many hills and cross numerous streams. Also, it was an ascending track all the way, finally ending at Tenom which is 1,200 feet above sea level. The last stretch of 12 miles between Tenom and Melalap, completed in 1907, was constructed at the request of the Manchester North Borneo Rubber Co. Ltd. which owned most of the estate lands in that area.<sup>21</sup> In Jesselton, the railway extended all the way to the wharf, facilitating the transfer of goods from the interior to seagoing vessels.<sup>22</sup>

The actual work to build the new township started on 9 November 1899. The clearing of land was immediately followed by the construction of shops, wharf, wave barriers and government buildings. The government offices were soon ready and in use by mid-1900. Messrs. George Pauling & Co., which was responsible for building the railway, constructed most of the buildings, including the first hospital in Jesselton for the company's workers. Most of the bricks used for the construction came from the brickfields owned by Chee Swee Cheng, who was also the main opium farmer for the west coast at that time.<sup>23</sup> At the completion of the shophouses at the end of 1900, 17 shop titles were given to the Chinese shopkeepers who had moved with the Company from Gaya to Gantian. Thus, Jesselton was started at the end of 1899, and became fully functional in 1900.

Prior to the establishment of the European-inspired township, Jesselton is known to have had several local names. Among the most popular was Api Api, a term usually associated with a cluster of Bajau fishing villages near the site of Jesselton. The Chinese continue to call the town 'Api' even in the present day. According to J. H. Macartney, "The Chinese almost always refer to the town simply as 'Api' and this is a corruption of the original name which is still used by the natives, i.e. Api Api."<sup>24</sup> Despite popular belief, the name does not mean "fire". Neither the Gaya fire of 1897 nor the Jesselton fire of August 1901 when 15 shophouses were destroyed inspired the term Api Api. The name actually referred to a cluster of Bajau fishing villages carrying the name Api Api which stood on the Jesselton site, roughly at the site of the present-day Capitol cinema. Api Api is the name of a mangrove tree (*Avicennia*) that was once commonly seen in the area around the Karamunsing–Tuaran (South) Road junction.<sup>25</sup> The name 'Api Api' had



already been mentioned in treaties concluded between the North Borneo Company and the Sultan of Brunei before the establishment of Jesselton. The same name was also mentioned in an article published in the *British North Borneo Herald* of 1883, which described the place. An earlier Dutch map published by J. Van Braan and G. Onder of Linden (Leiden) has Api Api marked at the same location of present-day Jesselton. On another early map produced in Amsterdam in 1657 by Pet, Schenk and Gervalk, the place was named "Apy Apy".<sup>26</sup>

Other names were also used by the locals when referring to the areas that constituted Jesselton. The first was Deasuka (or Diasuka), a Bajau term meaning a well-liked place or a pleasant place for passers-by to rest or to collect fresh water. The term was mentioned once in the *Herald* in 1900. Another name was Singgah Mata, which K. G. Tregonning mentioned was of Bajau origin, whereas Macartney pointed out that it is a Malay term meaning 'where the eyes linger'. This latter term was probably used by those who were plying the coastal areas and found the place soothing to the eyes. However, the two names of Deasuka and Singgah Mata did not really stick and are now only rarely remembered and of interest only to scholars and antiquarians.

The Jesselton of 1900 corresponded roughly to the area stretching from the present-day Community Centre to the State Library. It was much narrower than the present town centre, with only sufficient land for two rows of shophouses, which were on the present site of Gaya Street. The first reclamation project was started in 1901. The main government establishments in the new township were situated on the slope of the hills behind the township. The Residency and the government offices were located near the Atkinson Clock Tower (built in 1905); and the Treasury was sited where the police station is now. When the railway line reached Jesselton in 1902, the railway station was built at the site between the Atkinson Clock Tower and Gaya Street. The police station and the gaol were built on the site of present State Library. The wet market that was completed in 1904 was situated near the present Malaysia Memorial Fountains, with the pork market extended out to the sea for sanitary purposes. In 1903, public latrines were also built out over the sea.

One of the more enduring features of the new Jesselton is the *padang* (playing field) which, since early days, has been a permanent feature of town life. The first football match was played there on 31 August 1901, though the report for that day actually acknowledged that the match was played on a short strip between the *padang* and the railway line.

## Conclusion

Since its establishment in 1899, Jesselton has grown both in size and stature. Reclamation works were carried out on many occasions to expand the size of the town. By the time work broke out in 1941, almost half the town actually stood on reclaimed lands. The town was severely damaged during the closing stage of the war and had to be rebuilt. Much of post-war Jesselton developed in the symmetrical concept as that of the old township. When comparing present-day Kota Kinabalu and the old Jesselton, one has to acknowledge that present layout of Kota Kinabalu differs little from that of the old Jesselton.

Even as the town have expanded, it remained throughout as the final terminal for the railway and the main exit point for produce from the west coast. Hence,

judging from the manner the town had developed since its establishment in 1899, it is evident that the decision to move from Gantian was a correct decision. At the time the decision was made, it was primarily based on the few disadvantages associated with Gantian, including an exposed port and unsuitability as a terminal for the railway, the choice of Jesselton over Gantian or even Gaya also hinged on two other factors. After the sacking of the Gaya settlement by Mat Salleh, the Chartered Company proceeded to seek compensation from the Brunei Sultanate. The Managing Director, William Clarke Cowie and the Governor, L. P. Beaufort, took the opportunity to visit Brunei and negotiate with the Sultan of Brunei for the cession of other riverine districts which had hitherto been, and might always be, bases for hostile action on the part of Mat Salleh. The result of these negotiations brought Mengkabong, Menggatal and Api Api districts, opposite Gaya, under the North Borneo Company administration. With the acquisition of this new territory, it was possible to have the new township built on Api Api which became Jesselton.<sup>27</sup>

Closely related to this are the geographical advantages offered by the new strip of territory. The place was well sheltered from strong winds and rough seas, as Gaya Island served as a buffer against these natural elements. Also, the sea had the necessary depth to make it a most suitable deep sea harbour – a depth of 11 fathoms at the deepest point and about 4 fathoms near the shore. This would inevitably provide the new site with stronger advantages over Gantian.<sup>28</sup>

Recent development however, seemed to suggest that the choice of Gantian might not be a total failure. Even as Jesselton developed, it became too congested for a train to pull into the town proper. While the wharf was perfectly well-suited to handle merchant ships, it was unable to cope with the development of modern transportation in the form of large containers carriers. These shortcomings have been recognised by the state government in the 1980s and a new port was developed at the Sepangar Bay. The development of this new container port have more or less relegated the port of Kota Kinabalu to playing second fiddle and could only handle smaller transporters. Ironically, the site of Sepangar Port was not too far from where Gantian was formerly situated.

## **Selected References**

- British North Borneo Herald*, Various Issues for the year 1886, 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1933.
- Cowie, William C. *Brief Daily Record of Matters in Connection with His Recent Mission to Borneo*. London: North Borneo Company, 1899.
- Dwindle, J. M. "The Early History of Jesselton." *Borneo Society Journal*, No. 3, (July 1962), pp. 25-33.
- East, W. Gordon. *The Geography behind History: How Physical Environment Affects Historical Events*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1965.
- Lee Yong Leng. *North Borneo (Sabah): A Study in Settlement Geography*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1965.
- Macartney, J. H. "Jesselton Place Names." *Sabah Society Journal*, Vol. III, No. 3, (September 1967). p. 153.

- Rutter, Owen. *British North Borneo: An Account of Its History, Resources and Native Tribes*. London: Constable & Company, 1922.
- St. John, Spenser. *Life in the Forests of the Far East: Travels in Sabah and Sarawak in the 1860s*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1986. [first published 1862 by Smith, Elder and Co.].
- Tregonning, K. G. "The Mat Salleh Revolt (1894-1905)." *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. XXIX, Pt. 1, (1956). pp. 20-36.
- Tregonning, K. G. *A History of Modern Sabah, 1881-1963*. Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1965.
- Whitehead, John. *Exploration of Mount Kina Balu, North Borneo*. London, 1893.
- Wong Tze Ken, Danny. "Chee Swee Cheng." in Lee Kam Hing and Chow Mun Seong (comp.). *Biographical Dictionary of the Chinese in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1997. pp. 19-20.
- Wong Tze Ken, Danny. *The Transformation of an Immigrant Society: A Study of the Chinese of Sabah*. London: Asean Academic Press, 1998.
- Yeoh, Brenda S. A. "Historical Geographies of the Colonised World." in Brian Graham and Catherine Nash (eds.). *Modern Historical Geographies*. London: Pearson Education Limited 2000. pp. 146-166.

## ENDNOTES

---

- <sup>1</sup> W. Gordon East, *The Geography behind History: How Physical Environment Affects Historical Events*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1965), pp. 76-77.
- <sup>2</sup> J. H. Macartney, "Jesselton Place Names," *Sabah Society Journal*, Vol. III, No. 3, (September 1967), p. 153.
- <sup>3</sup> Spenser St. John, *Life in the Forests of the Far East: Travels in Sabah and Sarawak in the 1860s*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1986) [first published 1862 by Smith, Elder and Co.], p. 357.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 381.
- <sup>5</sup> J. M. Dwindle, "The Early History of Jesselton", *Borneo Society Journal*, No. 3, (July 1962), p. 25, see also Spenser St. John, p. 287.
- <sup>6</sup> *British North Borneo Herald* (hereafter *BNBH*), 1 September 1886.
- <sup>7</sup> *BNBH*, 1 October 1886.
- <sup>8</sup> John Whitehead, *Exploration of Mount Kina Balu, North Borneo*, (London, 1893), p. 24.
- <sup>9</sup> Mat Salleh was the most famous anti-colonial fighters in Sabah. He resisted Chartered Company rule from 1895 until his death in Tambunan in 1900. For studies on Mat Salleh, see Owen Rutter, *British North Borneo: An Account of Its History, Resources and Native Tribes*, (London: Constable & Company, 1922), pp. 188-213 and K. G. Tregonning, "The Mat Salleh Revolt (1894-1905)", *JMBRAS*, Vol. XXIX, Pt. 1, (1956), pp. 20-36.
- <sup>10</sup> Contrary to general belief, the railway was not built from Jesselton to the interior. Instead, it was started at Weston, on the Klias Peninsula and later from Beaufort before being extended to Jesselton.

<sup>11</sup> Dwinddle, "The Early History of Jesselton", p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Spenser St John, *Life in the Forests of the Far East*, p. 358.

<sup>13</sup> Diary Entry for 8<sup>th</sup> April 1899 in William C. Cowie, *Brief Daily Record of Matters in Connection with His Recent Mission to Borneo*, (London: North Borneo Company, 1899).

<sup>14</sup> *BNBH*, 1 August 1900.

<sup>15</sup> *BNBH*, 1 August 1899.

<sup>16</sup> *BNBH*, 16 July 1898.

<sup>17</sup> Dwinddle, "The Early History of Jesselton", p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> *BNBH*, 1899, p. 343.

<sup>19</sup> Sir Charles Jessel came from an illustrious Jewish family who founded the Merchant Bank in London. The bank had helped to bankroll some of the Chartered Company's earlier operations. Also among his ancestors was a chief justice of England. Despite the new township being named after him, Sir Charles Jessel never stepped foot in Jesselton.

<sup>20</sup> *BNBH*, 1 August 1900.

<sup>21</sup> *BNBH*, 16 January 1933.

<sup>22</sup> Immediately afterwards, George Pauling's firm was given the task of constructing the Tenom-Tawau line, and possibly another track from Marudu Bay to Tawau. However neither project ever took off, for the cost was simply colossal.

<sup>23</sup> Chee Swee Cheng was a native of Malacca who made his fortune first as the opium farmer for Labuan. Later, he moved his operations to the mainland and owned many properties, including an estate in Beaufort which he named Woodford Estate, after the middle name of Governor Woodford Birch. For a brief biography of Chee, see my entry on "Chee Swee Cheng" in Lee Kam Hing and Chow Mun Seong (comp.). *Biographical Dictionary of the Chinese in Malaysia*, (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1997), pp. 19-20.

<sup>24</sup> J. H. Macartney, "Jesselton Place Names", p. 153.

<sup>25</sup> Macartney, who conducted a study on the place names of Jesselton, mentioned that until 1948, there were still several Api Api trees along the swampy area of South Road. The trees were no longer seen after the place was reclaimed. See Macartney, "Place Names of Jesselton", p. 154. Macartney also mentioned that there are other places in Sabah that are also named Api Api, including Beaufort, Weston and Kudat Bay.

<sup>26</sup> Map in Sabah State Archives.

<sup>27</sup> *BNBH*, 1 April 1898.

<sup>28</sup> Admiralty Map, 1921.