

**Volume 2**

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**The Brookes of Brunei**

**Lead: By a combination of daring and benevolent despotism, the Brooke family helped bring the Sultanate of Brunei into the modern era.**

**Intro.: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: The tiny but independent state of Brunei lies surrounded by Malaysia on the northern coast of the ancient island of Borneo in the southwest Pacific. As early as the sixth century the area traded with and paid tribute to China. Until the influx of evangelical Islam in the 1400s, the**

**majority of people were Hindu worshippers. European contact with the region began with arrival of the expedition of Ferdinand Magellan but intensified with the coming of Portuguese and Dutch traders. The presence of Western traders tended to reduce the influence of the local government dominated by the native Sultanate and by 1800 Brunei, which had been much larger, had shrunk to only a small section of northern Borneo.**

**In the early 1840s the area was subjected to great internal turmoil due to racial conflict between the ruling Malaysians, Chinese immigrant workers, and headhunting aboriginal natives in the interior, and**

**complicated by the inept leadership of the physically deformed and mentally weak Sultan, Omar Ali. Into this chaos came one of those unusually gifted entrepreneurs thrown up by British Imperialism, James Brooke. Heir to a considerable fortune, after service in the army in India Brooke outfitted a schooner and sailed for the East Indies to further European settlement there. In Singapore he heard of the troubles in Brunei and offered his services to the royal family. With his aid a rebellion by local Malay chieftains was suppressed and as a reward he was given thousands of square miles of territory.**

**He and his nephew, Charles, and great-nephew Charles Vyner, ruled as**

**benevolent despots until after World War II. They admired the local culture and did little to change it, kept taxes very low, suppressed headhunting and piracy, and only slowly introduced education and social changes so as to not conflict with native traditions. In contrast to other British fortune hunters of that era, the Brookes did not profit greatly from their power and lived near the edge of poverty during most of their rule.**

**In 1946 Britain acquired Brunei from the family and gave it independence in the 1980s. It is one of the wealthiest nations on earth and its Sultan perhaps the richest man. In 1914 it was discovered that Brunei**

**floats on a vast lake of oil and natural gas.**

**At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

**Resources**

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