



ERSKINE MURRAY'S FATAL ADVENTURE
IN BORNEO, 1843-44

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The career of Sir James Brooke, the "White Raja" of Sarawak, who a hundred and twenty years ago carved out a kingdom for himself on the west coast of Borneo, is familiar enough; few, however, have heard of another adventurer, contemporary with Brooke, who likewise tried to make a career for himself in Borneo and whose venture, tragic though its outcome was, also had an effect on the history of that part of the world. This was James Erskine Murray.

Murray, a member of a noble Scots family, was born May 4, 1810, the second son of the 7th Baron Ellibank. He became a lawyer and was admitted as an advocate at the Scottish Bar where he practiced for a few years. In 1843, inspired no doubt by the increasing interest in Asian affairs arising from the Anglo-Chinese war and the British occupation of Hong Kong and by the attention given in the British press to Raja Brooke's activities, he bought the brigantine *Warlock* and in her sailed to Australia and thence to Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong he sold the *Warlock* and, entering into partnership with a merchant named Bowra, purchased two ships. These were the schooner *Young Queen*, 90 tons, Captain A. Hart, also referred to in some documents as the *Yonge Queene*, and the brig *Anna*, 200 tons, Captain H. Lewis. According to a subsequent statement by a participant in Murray's adventure, it was generally understood in Hong Kong that Murray projected an expedition in emulation of Raja Brooke's occupation of Sarawak.¹ With this prospect before them, plenty of seamen were willing to serve under him. He thus met no difficulty in manning his two ships with a total of forty seamen in addition to officers. Both crafts were heavily armed; the *Young Queen* carried an 18-pounder pivot-gun amidships, a 12-pounder pivot-gun on the forecastle, two 4-pound stern chasers, and six small pivot-guns on either broadside capable of discharging shot of one pound weight or charges of grape-shot. The brig *Anna* carried four 4-pounders on either broadside and a pivot-gun on the top gallant forecastle. Pistols, cutlasses and boarding-pikes were also provided. Stores and trade goods were taken aboard, but the heavy armament and the unusually large number of the two crews left barely room for a week's provisions and water.

1. W. C. Cave Thomas, Murray's Expedition to Borneo, an Episode in the Early Life of Edwin Robins Thomas. Ed. by Temple Orme (2nd ed., London: Henderson and Spalding, [195?]), p. 1.

On November 9, 1843, the two vessels set sail from Hong Kong, and a fortnight later they arrived off the Sambas River in western Borneo. They ascended the river to the Dutch settlement some fifty miles upstream where they stayed for a few days. The Dutch treated the expedition hospitably, and there is no evidence that they were much interested in its objectives. From Sambas they went south along the Borneo coast to the Barito River and up that stream to the Dutch settlement at Bandjermassin, arriving on the 12th December. They spent the Christmas season at Bandjermassin. On Christmas Day a number of the men drank too much and came to blows; order was restored only by the intervention of Murray himself. Despite this incident, they were well treated at Bandjermassin, but the Dutch here were evidently more wide awake than their fellows at Sambas. The heavy armament of the two ships, the naval-style uniform worn by officers and men, and the discipline which was as strict as that of the Royal Navy, all were such as to arouse interest and suspicion.

At this time the Dutch were well established in the more developed islands of the East Indies. Java was completely under their control; they held most of the major ports of Sumatra; the Moluccas and the island of Celebes were in their hands. In Borneo, however, their hold was slender. They concentrated on more prosperous and profitable areas in other islands, and in Borneo were content to hold one or two ports on the south and southwest coasts. They had not extended their authority to the east coast or to any serious extent inland. Nevertheless, they regarded Borneo as being within their field of influence. It is, then, not surprising that the arrival of Murray's expedition caused some concern and that when the two ships left Bandjermassin, a gunboat followed them to the mouth of the river.

At Sambas and Bandjermassin, Murray gleaned what information he could about the coasts of Borneo, although it would seem from later events that this information was inadequate. He now made for the east coast, but after he left Bandjermassin the expedition's troubles soon began. At that time, as still today, the seas around Borneo were much troubled by piracy, and often inadequately armed merchant-ships fell victim to Malay or other depredators. On this occasion, some Malay *prahus* (boats) mistaking the two vessels for simple merchantmen, tried to attack, but they were quickly beaten off by Murray's superior armament. Later some more *prahus* were sighted. To remedy his lack of local knowledge, Murray hired a man from one of them to act as pilot, but as he promptly tried to run the two ships aground, he was hastily sent back to his own boat. Murray had to proceed without any expert knowledge of local conditions.

Early in February, 1844, the expedition reached the mouth of what they called the Coti or Kuti River but what is more properly called the Mahakam River. The Mahakam is the most important river in south-east Borneo, and its valley was in those days the site of a large state, ruled by the Sultan of Kutei--

hence the "Coti" or "Kuti" River. The Sultan had his capital at the town of Tenggarong, ninety or so miles upstream from the river's mouth, and Murray therefore entered the vast delta which the river forms, with the intention of taking his ships up-river to the capital. Taking soundings all the time, and frequently warping the ships round bends in the river, the expedition made its way through the tortuous delta-creeks and so cautiously up-stream. The survivor of the affair already cited gives a graphic account of this part of the voyage:

The banks of the river were densely covered with tropical growths--palms of great variety, cocoanuts, dates, &c. Numerous monkeys made the branches of the trees shake when they were disturbed by either the boats or the vessels nearing the banks. Alligators were also in force, some of large dimensions, and when disturbed by the flotilla passing the recurring mud-banks, they made either for the river or for the jungle; the boats' crews had to observe the utmost vigilance when paying out warps. This warping under a tropical sun with not a breath of air stirring was trying in the extreme, and at sundown there was the mosquito torment. That the Malays were treacherous was an article of faith with the expedition, and therefore one whole watch was always kept up, while the watch off slept at their quarters.²

Murray found that between the sea and Tenggarong lay the town of Samarinda, some twelve miles above the head of the delta. Here he anchored and fired a salute. The ships' people were startled when the salute was returned from a battery whose guns were evidently of as heavy a caliber as those they themselves carried. They found too, what had apparently not been previously realized, that the town was not in the hands of the Dayaks of Borneo, or even of any of the Malays who had settled much of the Borneo coastland, but in the hands of Bugis.

The Bugis people originated on the island of Celebes, east of Borneo. Their principal center had been the town of Makassar. In 1667 the Dutch captured Makassar and imposed on Celebes their usual monopolistic policy in matters of commerce. This ruined the Bugis, who were great seamen and traders. Having to find some other livelihood than honest trade, the Bugis took to piracy and became the terror of the East Indian seas. Some settled at the estuaries of rivers and from these dominated the surrounding countryside and the neighboring seas. Some became mercenary soldiers, selling their swords to any ruler in Malaya or the eastern archipelago who would pay them, and as a result they

2. Thomas, op. cit., p. 4.

became the effective though not the nominal rulers of wide areas. They have often been likened to the Norsemen of Europe in an earlier age.

The Sultanate of Kutei had shared the fate of many other parts of the archipelago in becoming the scene of a Bugis settlement, and, as elsewhere, the Bugis dominated the local people, including the Sultan. As well-armed as Murray's own expedition, and being courageous seamen and warriors, the Bugis could be formidable adversaries. If Murray was to achieve anything in Kutei, he must come to terms with the Bugis, but the Bugis had no desire to see their own trade rivalled by foreigners, still less to allow anyone to destroy their power in the way that Raja Brooke was destroying the power of the pirate chiefs on Borneo's west coast. How much of their attitude Murray at this time realized is not known, but if he had grasped the true state of affairs he would, it may be thought, have decided on a speedy retreat. Instead, he had an interview with the local ruler, who told him that if he wanted to trade, he must obtain permission from the Sultan at Tenggarong, forty miles farther upstream, and so the expedition went on its way, leaving a potentially hostile settlement between it and the open sea.

The wind gave the ships little assistance in this part of the voyage. Great exertions were required of the crews in preventing the vessels from running aground, but in the end they came opposite the town of Tenggarong. Again the ships fired a salute and again it was returned, but this time by an obviously inferior armament. One of the officers, with an interpreter, was sent ashore with a letter for the Sultan, who received the deputation in his bamboo and thatch palace. The Sultan replied to the request for permission to trade by saying that though himself favorably disposed, he must consult his *datus* or chiefs, as was indeed the Malay practice. Next day the Sultan visited the ships, and the day after that as many of the ships' company as could safely be spared were entertained ashore at a feast. After the meal, Murray thought to impress his hosts with the strength of his expedition by holding a shooting-match against them. He was disconcerted to find that they were as skillful marksmen as any of his own party and that they could readily handle the "walking-stick air-gun" which he had.³

For some days after this, little happened. Chinese traders came alongside the two ships, selling fruit and poultry, and from them it was learned that some Europeans, probably Englishmen, were held prisoner in Kutei, having been captured recently when the Sultan's prahus pirated an English ship. A boat was therefore sent to investigate. Up a creek off the main stream a ship's boat was found, but before it could be examined a body of local people appeared and warned the party off.

3. Thomas, op. cit., p. 7.

It was now noticed that many boats containing large numbers of armed men were making their way downstream where they could, if they wished, obstruct a withdrawal by the expedition. One night too an attempt was made to board the ships though the attackers were easily repelled.

Murray now, on 13th February, called the commanders of his two ships into conference and, having discussed the situation, put his view of it into writing.⁴ During the time that they had been at Tenggarong, he wrote, he had tried by all possible means to gain the friendship of the people so that "a vast field for English enterprise and manufactures" might be opened up in this part of Borneo. No English ships, so far as he knew, had ever before come to Kutei--in this he was mistaken, for other evidence shows that a Mr. Dalton, a traveller and trader, spent more than a year there in 1827-28.⁵ But there was no doubt, Murray continued, that a number of Europeans had been murdered by the Kutei people or were being kept in captivity after being pirated at sea. For this last reason, while seeking friendly relations, he had had to exercise vigilance in his dealings with the Sultan.

Murray went on to record that Samarinda was inhabited by Bugis, "a nation of all the tribes of the Archipelago the most determinedly bloodthirsty and the greatest haters of Europeans." They had complete control over the Sultan and his subjects and monopolized the trade on the river. He had hoped to open trade with the Sultan and with the Dayak peoples, who would gladly be free of their Bugis oppressors. But the Sultan proved to be a bad man, "whose life was one continued course of murder and piracy" and who was personally responsible for the pirating of no less than twenty-seven European ships and the murder of their captains. Murray had, he wrote, proposed to the Sultan that he himself or some other Englishman be allowed to reside at Tenggarong to protect any of his fellow countrymen who might come to trade, but for fear of the Bugis the Sultan had firmly declined. Yet the Sultan and his datus said that they wanted to trade with the English and that they hoped more English ships would come there. Following this, Murray had sent the Sultan samples of his trade goods, namely salt and tobacco, but these were sent to him with the message that they could be disposed of only at Samarinda. From this Murray concluded that the Sultan hoped to lure him into the hands of the Bugis and that the earlier expression of a desire for trade with Englishmen was only a device which might mislead traders into coming there, to their destruction. Furthermore, in the last twenty-four hours some fourteen guns had been stationed within a few hundred yards of the ships;

4. Public Record Office, FO 12/3.

5. J. Crawford, Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1856), p. 202.

houses had been pulled down to provide a field of fire. Boats had dropped downstream to an island below the anchorage, apparently to set up a battery there, and many armed men had assembled near the Sultan's palace.

Murray therefore considered whether to make his way downstream. This would be dangerous; if either ship were driven aground by the current, its crew would be in a most precarious position. Alternatively it might be possible to go farther inland and there seek the alliance of the Dayaks against the Bugis, but the ships were not well enough provisioned for this to be feasible. The solution, in his view, was to obtain hostages from the Sultan to ensure a safe withdrawal downstream. He must also, as a matter of duty, seek the release of the European prisoners. He wanted as well recompense for the losses incurred through the treatment the expedition had received, probably meaning the loss imposed by the unprofitable trip to Tenggarong. He therefore proposed to address the Sultan, making these demands and saying that if the hostages were not sent aboard he would open fire.

Next day, the 14th February, Captain Hart of the *Young Queen* and Captain Lewis of the *Anna* endorsed Murray's statement with the words "I coincide with the above views" and signed it. The letter was not sent immediately. Perhaps Murray wished to give further thought to the situation. But on the night of the 15th-16th a second attempt to board the ships was made, and probably this determined Murray to bring matters to a conclusion.

On the 16th morning, the letter to the Sultan was sent. It referred to the hostile preparations which were being made ashore and demanded as hostages for the good behavior of the Sultan and his people, that the Prime Minister, the Sultan's son-in-law, the Shahbandar or Port Officer, and the Secretary be sent aboard, and also all Europeans and others held prisoner be handed over. These terms were to be complied with within two hours.

The ultimatum was sent ashore at 8:30 on the morning of the 16th. By 11 o'clock no reply had been received, but there was much activity on shore and among the local craft lying off the town. Murray then fired a shot over the Sultan's palace, and immediately the batteries on shore opened fire, as did war-boats which had been lying behind the island a little way downstream. The shore batteries soon found the range, and the ships began to suffer damage and casualties. At 12:30 the anchors were therefore slipped and the ships dropped down with the current aided by a light breeze.

As they made their way downstream, the two vessels were pursued by some fifty war-boats which kept up a consistent fire of round shot, grape and musketry. Lower down the river several hidden batteries opened fire. The pursuing boats were reinforced

by others which joined them from points down the river. As the two sailing vessels made slow progress on account of the winding of the river, the pursuers were able to fire with some accuracy. At about 3 o'clock in the afternoon the schooner ran short of gunpowder and a boat had to be sent to the brig for supplies; this operation was effected without loss, despite the continued fire of the enemy. The wind changed, and by 4 o'clock was blowing up the river. The current was strong enough to keep some way on the vessels despite the wind, but was not strong enough to prevent difficulties--at one point the *Anna* ran into the bank and was got off only with the aid of a boat from the *Young Queen*. Firing by both parties in this running fight continued throughout the afternoon. At about 6 o'clock in the evening, the wind failed altogether. For better security during the approaching hours of darkness, when an attempt to board might be made, the two vessels were now lashed together.

Night was falling fast, and Samarinda was only about eight miles ahead. In the hope of slipping past unnoticed, the ships covered all lights and maintained complete silence. The darkness was an asset since it brought an end to the cannonade of the pursuing prahus, but it made navigation along the tortuous river more difficult. A ship's boat was therefore kept alongside so as to pull the vessels round should they veer towards the shore, but the current, running at $4\frac{1}{2}$ knots, kept the ships moving and able to continue safely downstream. There followed, says the log of the *Young Queen*, "two hours of awful suspense."⁶ According to the log, the pursuing prahus hailed the townspeople as the two vessels were passing Samarinda at 8:30, so as to warn the Bugis what was happening. But a participant in the affair, writing years later, says that the Bugis were already alert and had placed fires on the bank opposite the town so that the vessels should be silhouetted against the glare.⁷ Whatever the facts about this, the Bugis ashore opened fire without, according to the log, doing much damage, though the above-mentioned account by a member of the expedition refers to considerable damage to the ships' spars and casualties amongst the men. The two vessels made no reply, so as not to show their exact position, and the current in this part of the river being strong they soon drew out of gunshot from the town. The prahus maintained their pursuit and were joined by more boats from Samarinda.

It was evident that if the prahus were to be eluded, greater speed was essential. The two ships could therefore no longer proceed lashed together. Moreover, the crews were becoming exhausted by their prolonged efforts. Murray therefore considered concentrating his men on the *Anna* and abandoning the *Young*

6. P.R.O. FO 12/3.

7. Thomas, op. cit., p. 11.

Queen. He proposed to attach a time-fuse to the magazine in the abandoned ship, set to blow her up after the brig had drawn clear. However, after a conference with his officers he left a party of eight volunteers aboard the schooner and then cast off. The brig went ahead, but the schooner made slow progress. The former had sufficient men to man a boat which could take her in tow if need be, but the schooner with its small complement could not do this. The constant fire which the ships kept up and the tiredness, which no doubt affected the crews of the prahus as much as those of the two vessels, checked the enemy's enthusiasm, and for a time the attack weakened.

At dawn the enemy renewed his efforts. Some of the prahus even managed to get ahead of the schooner, but she was able to make more sail and to catch up with the brig at the head of the delta. According to the statement of the survivor already cited, the brig now ran aground on a sandbank, and when the schooner tried to pass her in the hope of anchoring and rendering assistance, she also grounded. A contemporary statement by the expedition's surgeon, Dr. W. Sael, which is more likely to be accurate, says on the other hand that the vessels had to anchor because there was not enough water to cross the bar at the head of the delta, and the two vessels had in consequence to wait for the tide.⁸

Certainly the two ships lay helpless for some hours, and while they waited the attack was reinforced from an unexpected quarter. A Belgian ship, the *Charles*, had on the previous day grounded on a sandbank off the mouth of the river, and when at daybreak she became visible from the shore, a number of prahus came out to pillage her. The officers and crew abandoned ship and escaped in their small boats, eventually reaching Makassar in safety. The prahus returning from this successful foray joined those pursuing Murray's vessels, so that the onslaught became more violent.

Thus, according to the surgeon's statement, the two vessels were now fired on from ahead as well as astern. Murray himself took a hand in laying the schooner's guns, and while so doing he was fatally wounded. A shot struck him in the left breast, and he died almost immediately. The words "My God" were all he had time to utter.

Despite the loss of their commander, the ships' crews maintained their resistance, and after seven hours' hard fighting the tide had risen so it was possible to warp the vessels over the bar, though they grounded several times in the process. Once across the bar, they made good speed through the delta and were able to reach the sea without further casualties. They were still pursued, but when the open sea had been gained the vessels

8. The Times, London, 19 September, 1844.

were able to draw ahead. The last shot in the action was fired at about 8 o'clock in the evening, and after that the prahus abandoned their pursuit.

The violence of the battle, which lasted for nearly thirty-six hours, is clear from the fact that the brig alone fired 720 rounds during the action and the schooner about 500.⁹ Besides Murray, two men were killed and five wounded. Murray was buried at sea on the next morning, the 18th of February, 1844.

The two vessels made first for Menado, in northern Celebes, where the wounded were landed; one, a brother of Captain Hart, was later given a passage to Singapore in H.M.S. *Samarang* which was engaged in a surveying cruise in eastern seas.¹⁰ But the expedition's misfortunes were not yet over; mutiny broke out on the schooner *Young Queen* and Captain Hart had to shoot the ringleader. However, they ultimately reached Hong Kong once more.

Murray's disaster evoked little sympathy from his contemporaries in Borneo waters. He was criticized for his "imprudence and unguarded conduct" which "brought upon himself the attack."¹¹ There is justice in this view. It is evident that Murray acted on inadequate information and so was led to visit a particularly dangerous area. If, says a contemporary, he had gone farther north along the Borneo coast, he would have been well received, for the Bugis were not established there and the people were friendly.¹² His ignorance of local conditions thus caused him to commit himself to very unfriendly country. It is also evident that he was imprudent; wisdom should have deterred him from going so many miles up the river, leaving the hostile settlement of Samarinda between him and his way of escape.

There is some uncertainty about Murray's real aims. It appears that when the expedition was under preparation in Hong Kong, it was generally understood that he aimed at forming a permanent settlement in Borneo.¹³ An officer of H.M.S. *Samarang* also says that Murray "attempted to establish a colony" in Kutei.¹⁴ In the statement by Murray which his two captains

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9. The Times, op. cit., and Annual Register, 1844.
10. F. A. Marryat, Borneo and the Indian Archipelago (London: Longman, 1848), p. 44.
11. Ibid., p. 229.
12. E. Belcher, Narrative of the Voyage of H.M.S. Samarang (London: Reeve, 1848), p. 234.
13. Thomas, op. cit., p. 1.
14. Marryat, op. cit., p. 44.

countersigned, he says that he had suggested to the Sultan that he himself, or some other Englishman--for in those days Scots did not scorn to refer to themselves as English--should be "allowed to reside here for the protection of those of his countrymen" who might come to trade. This seems to imply a permanent establishment. Again, the Governor of the Straits Settlements wrote on 19 June 1844, that Murray "had been in treaty for a location in the Sultan's dominions."¹⁵ On the other hand, the Governor-General of India in reporting on the disaster stated that "the Hon. Erskine Murray lost his life in endeavoring to open a commercial intercourse with the Sultan of Coti and the Dyak tribes, and not, as the Dutch authorities have been led to conclude, in attempting to establish a colony."¹⁶

On the whole, despite the views of the Governor-General, it seems probable that Murray aimed at more than mere trade. This certainly, as the Governor-General indicated, was the view of the Dutch authorities in the archipelago. They had so far paid little attention to Borneo, and the activities of Raja Brooke had been viewed with little interest, but Murray's adventure stung them into action. It may be that they could regard the foundation of a British settlement in Borneo by one Englishman with indifference, but if others were to follow Brooke's example, preventive action must be taken.

Following Murray's death, the Netherlands Indies Government in Java sent a small naval expedition to Kutei, and a Commissioner was dispatched to investigate the tragedy and to strengthen the Dutch position on Borneo's east coast. The Commissioner made an agreement with the Sultan of Kutei, who had expected to be punished for Murray's death and so was willing to come to terms. This agreement prohibited traders other than Dutch from settling in Kutei. Similar agreements were made with other rulers on the east coast. Early in 1846, an Administrator of the East Coast was appointed, with his headquarters in Kutei itself. By these measures the Dutch, moved by Murray's adventure, imposed their rule on eastern Borneo. The steps which they took also had the effect of forestalling any possible punitive action by the British.

The Dutch took the matter up in London. There was an agitation in the London press for the Royal Navy to take measures to avenge Murray. The Governor of the Straits Settlements was favorable to such action, but he decided to await orders from his superior, the Governor-General of India. The Governor-General, however, was not prepared to take a strong line; he did not record his reasons for this decision or lack of decision, but they can be readily surmised. Borneo was remote from India. It was certainly close to the Straits Settlements which were in those

15. P.R.O. FO 12/3.

16. Ibid.

days part of British India and whose merchants were affected by piracy and lawlessness in eastern seas, but the Straits Settlements were the unwanted child of India, and the Indian Government took little interest in their affairs. The East India Company, too, had withdrawn from the China trade when its charter was renewed in 1833, and the Government of India was no longer interested in policing the seas on the China run. So nothing was done.

The Dutch, however, feared that the British would exact vengeance, and in August, 1844, their Minister in London presented a note warning Lord Aberdeen, the Foreign Secretary, that Kutei was a dependency of the Sultanate of Bandjermassin and so was part of the Netherlands Indies, and protesting against any punitive action there by British forces. The note also remonstrated against Murray's proceedings in Kutei as a violation of the sovereign rights of the Netherlands. Lord Aberdeen replied in November that he had no knowledge of Murray's activities, which were entirely unofficial, and he gave an assurance that no action would be taken by Her Majesty's Government which might infringe Netherlands sovereignty.

This was not enough for the Dutch. They then took up the case of Raja Brooke and complained about his activities also, and a long diplomatic wrangle ensued. The Dutch based their argument, as regards both Brooke and Murray on the Anglo-Dutch agreement of 17 March 1824. This agreement, designed to terminate Anglo-Dutch rivalry in the eastern archipelago, provided that the British should withdraw from Sumatra and the Dutch withdraw from Malaya and Singapore; the British undertook also not to interfere in any of the islands south of the Straits of Singapore. Some of the Dutch interpreted this last undertaking as precluding the British from intruding anywhere in the archipelago south of the latitude of Singapore; the effect of the agreement was, they held, to draw a line through the archipelago on the latitude of Singapore, leaving all south of that line to the Netherlands. The British view, on the other hand, was that the undertaking referred only to the islands immediately south of Singapore and not to islands eastwards thereof, whatever their latitude. In any case, most of Borneo lay north of the latitude of Singapore, so the Dutch advanced the further argument that the intention of the 1824 agreement was to keep British and Dutch apart from one another. Therefore, if the Dutch were settled in a part of any island, the British were bound by the spirit of the agreement not to intrude anywhere in that island, however remote from a Dutch settlement.

This wrangle went on for years intermittently, and the point was still being argued forty years later. Neither side would give way. But the Dutch were unable to prevent the British in 1846 from making the island of Labuan a colony or to prevent the extension of Raja Brooke's territories, and thirty-odd years after Murray's death the Dutch protested in vain, on grounds

similar to those advanced in 1844-45, against the establishment of the British North Borneo Company.

Thus Murray's disastrous adventure had important consequences. It led directly to the imposition of Dutch control over the east coast of Borneo, and it initiated a dispute between the British and Netherlands Governments which continued almost to the end of the century. Abortive though the expedition was, it is nevertheless an episode of some note in the history of the eastern archipelago.