

CHARLES ALMA BAKER'S UNEASY ROLE IN THE EXPANSION OF THE MALAYAN ECONOMY 1890s-1910s

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This paper examines the role played by Charles Alma Baker, a New Zealander, in developing the Malay States in the period of the Federated Malay States (FMS) from the late 1890s to the early twentieth century, and the administrative hurdles he faced in carrying out his work. Baker contributed directly to the economy by investing his capital in tin mines and rubber plantations. He carried out surveys and supervised construction of new roads to service the rapid expansion of commercial agriculture and tin mining in the FMS. Although he was successful to a certain extent, there were many occasions when he had to confront land officers, Residents, Residents-General, and High Commissioners. He became the victim of official harassment. The intention here is to look into his progress as well as the obstacles that he faced in an era when the Colonial Office was clearly in support of investments. However, there was a great deal of ambivalence at all levels of decision-making with regards to the promotion of investments in the FMS. Charles Alma Baker was a victim of this ambiguous policy.

The discussion is divided into two parts. The first part looks into Baker's activities in the Malay States, particularly surveying, planting, mining and acts of philanthropy. The second part will look into the administrative hurdles faced by Baker in carrying out his activities in the plantation and mining sectors. Baker's problem will be analyzed within the context of the residential system; the Federation Agreement of 1895; and the role of the Colonial Office in encouraging investments during both these eras. A number of specific cases that showed sheer indifference among British officials towards Baker at all levels of administration will be highlighted.

Charles Alma Baker was born in Otago, New Zealand, on 16 January 1857. He received his early education at the Omeru School in New Zealand, and began his career as a survey cadet with a real estate firm, Connell and

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Moodie.² He became an authorized surveyor in 1881.³ He married Florence Isabel, daughter of Sir Frederick Whitaker (leading politician of the day) in 1884.

Baker's Involvement as a Contract Surveyor in the State of Perak

Baker left New Zealand in 1890 and arrived in Perak, which was one of the progressive states in the FMS. His presence in Perak was not planned. Baker was supposed to have headed to Ceylon to pursue a career as surveyor. When he missed his ship to Ceylon at Singapore, he came to know about the job vacancy for surveyors that were available in the state of Perak. It was such a turn of event which brought Baker to Perak, and charted his destiny for the next 30 years of his involvement in Malaya.⁴

Perak was the first state in the FMS. Consequent to British intervention, Perak witnessed great progress, and received thousands of applications every month for the mining sector. Kinta proved to be the most promising district in Perak. Every other district in Perak had to be surveyed and the land title entered in the *mukim* (district) register. This did not apply to the district of Kinta, as the Survey Department was hard pressed to keep up with the volume of land applications for mining there. In the interest of maintaining uniformity, the Land Office entered into a contract with Baker to survey the land that was applied for.

The contract system was extended to these agricultural lands. All applicants had to deposit their fees in the Treasury and on completion of the surveys the Government would pay the Contract Surveyor.⁵ Baker became a contract surveyor for Kinta Land district in 1892 and had to ensure that the land was free of any encumbrances, such as overlapping claims. He also had to provide a tracing of the surveys carried out. Baker employed six other surveyors to make sure that the surveys were done 'rapidly, accurately and continuously'.⁶

Unfortunately, Baker's contract was terminated at the end of 1897.⁷ His position as a contract surveyor was envied by the land officers and other

² Barrie Macdonald, *Imperial Patriot: Charles Alma Baker and the History of Limestones Downs*, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1993, p. 10.

³ Ho Tak Ming, *Generations: The Story of Batu Gajah*, Ipoh: Perak Academy, 2005, p. 55.

⁴ Macdonald, *Imperial Patriot*, p. 21.

⁵ *Report of the Protected Malay States, 1895*, p. 9.

⁶ Macdonald, *Imperial Patriot*, p. 21.

⁷ It was reported thus in the Perak Administration Report for the year 1897: 'In the Kinta district a monopoly of all revenue survey work has been given to a private Surveyor, whose contract does not expire until the end of the current year. ... There have been many difficulties and much friction connected with this survey monopoly during the whole of the past year, and it is to be hoped that, when the present contract expires, either a system

British officials. This was because a government surveyor was only paid \$2 to demarcate a five-acre plot with boundary stone whereas Baker was paid \$18. Baker gave one quarter of the amount in salary to the surveyors to whom he had sub-contracted the work. He still made a profit by subcontracting his work. It was reported that between 1894 and 1896 the survey fees paid annually to Baker were over \$62,000 or about 7000 pounds sterling. Such an amount could only be earned by an official who had served a minimum of ten years in the colonial service. Even the local land officer earned less than 2500 pounds sterling a year.⁸

With such an income, Baker was considered rich in local terms. He lived well and was able to build a bungalow close to the district magistrate's residence. His house was seen as a symbol of his achievements and ambitions. He then moved into social activities by involving himself in pastimes such as playing polo and being an active member in the Kinta Gymkhana Club.⁹ He was also a member of the racing club.

There was deep-seated prejudice against Baker. When Baker started to build his home in 1894, the local papers reported thus: 'It appears that boundary stone planting in these parts is a more profitable job than tea or coffee planting, or even tin mining.'¹⁰

As the days passed by, Baker faced problems with the Kinta Land Office staff who questioned the accuracy of Baker's surveying and adherence to mapping requirements. Baker had problems with W. P. Hume, the land officer of Kinta. Baker's fees were reduced and he appealed directly to the British Resident. He had to prove he was the victim of official harassment and not incompetent in his work.

When things got out of hand between Baker and the Land officials, a committee of inquiry was formed to study the matter and it was found that both parties were at fault. Their conflict was settled, with Baker being granted 3000 pounds sterling. All in all, as a contract surveyor for seven years, Baker had submitted a total of 7500 individual survey plans, district plans and topographical images to the Government of Perak.¹¹

of licensed Surveyors, working under the Chief Surveyor, as in Selangor, or the ordinary system of Revenue Surveyors, in force in the other districts of Perak, will be substituted for the present very unsatisfactory state of affair in the Kinta district.' This did not stop the state from hiring contract surveyors. Two were hired from New Zealand to work in the districts of Kinta and Batang Padang. *Perak Administration Report for the Year 1899*, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁹ Khoo Salma Nasution and Abdur-Razzaq Lubis, *Kinta Valley: Pioneering Malaysia's Modern Development*, Ipoh: Perak Academy, 2005, p. 117.

¹⁰ *Perak Pioneer*, 29 August 1894.

¹¹ Macdonald, *Imperial Patriot*, p. 28.

Baker's Planting Activities in Perak

Baker went into rubber planting while he was a contract surveyor. In 1894, Baker worked on 10,000 acres under agricultural lease: 5,000 acres south of Batu Gajah in the Kinta Valley district and another 5000 acres at Krian district in upper Perak. According to Macdonald, it was the first application for rubber plantation land in the FMS. Ernest Birch, then Resident of Perak, welcomed Baker's intention to plant rubber. Baker was given the right to plant rubber on generous terms. For ten years it was rent-free; thereafter the annual rental was 2s 4d per acre, export duty would not exceed a farthing per pound, and a certain proportion of the land had to be cleared and planted every year.¹²

However, the offer was not welcomed by the Acting High Commissioner (AHC) for FMS. He imposed many new conditions which caused Baker to abandon his desire to venture into commercial planting for a while. In late 1906, Baker applied for 3000 acres of agricultural land for himself and another 640 acres for his friend.¹³ His application was not approved on the basis that it was merely speculative. Although the officials in Batu Gajah were not forthcoming in approving Baker's application, the Resident was prepared to approve 2000 acres on the usual conditions. Baker was later able to acquire 3165 acres of land to plant rubber, and it was named Kinta Valley Estate.¹⁴ In time, it came to be regarded as one of the largest private estates in Malaya. Baker also purchased another estate at Pondok Tanjong Estate near Taiping (which covered 2600 acre). By 1919 Baker had invested 70,000 thousand pounds sterling in the Kinta Valley Estate and 60,000 pounds sterling at Pondok Tanjong.¹⁵ Both of Baker's estates only met minimum leasehold requirements—one-third was planted with rubber in five years, and the rest was not fully developed until after the World War II (1939-45).

Besides involvement in plantations, Baker also introduced many new methods in the field of agriculture, one of which was *changkoling* that is digging over the ground in between the trees. This was believed to turn all the weeds into the soil and fertilise the ground, and prevent rain from carrying off the topsoil. He published two brief manuals before World War I (1914-18) urging the adoption of *changkoling*. He argued that *changkoling* would not only reduce erosion, retain moisture and protect fertility, but also

¹² Ibid., p. 38.

¹³ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁵ Baker to Collector of Land Revenue, 20 June 1919, KLO 450/1919; Pondok Tanjong Estate, Accounts for 1941, quoted from Macdonald, *Imperial Patriot*, p. 46.

help to eradicate termites and diseases through the burying of the debris that harboured them.¹⁶

Baker's Mining Activities in Perak

Baker ventured into mining while he was a planter. In the late 1890s and early twentieth century he invested the capital accumulated from contract surveying and his plantations into mining. His first mining business began in 1894 when he was granted 150 acres of mining land, which spread from Kinta Valley in the north to Kampar in the south. He was also the first to advocate the use of the dredge as a means of extracting more tin.

In order to work the mine effectively, investors at this time were subleasing their land to the Chinese in return for *cabut* or tribute.¹⁷ Baker did the same and that enabled him to enrich himself in the mining sector. In 1897, Baker was granted 25 acres of a mining lease covering 500 acres around Kinta Land Office. His decision to sublet the land did not go down well with British officials. There was jealousy towards Baker's engagement in mining and agriculture when he maintained minimum labour by subletting his lease. According to Macdonald, 'there was a renewal of the ill-feeling that had characterised his earlier relationship with the officials of the Kinta Land Office.'¹⁸

In the early twentieth century, Baker was involved in mining tin ore deposits from the caves and traverses of the limestone hills of Gunung Lano near Simpang Pulai, six miles south of Ipoh. The mine produced over a million dollars worth of tin ore between 1902 and 1922.¹⁹ Here too he had problems with British officials who were reluctant to grant him extra acreage. Gunung Lano was worked until 1920s. His last cast mining venture in 1916 at Ulu Johan Valley, Perak, did not materialize because of the prejudice that British officials harboured against him.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁷ The owner in return for *chabut* or tribute, subleases his land to a mining contractor who is usually Chinese. The contractor then purchases machinery and hires labour under a further contract with an 'advancer' who provides capitals in return for an agreed share of the proceeds and the right to profit further from the provision of food, supplies and opium for the miners. Macdonald, *Imperial Patriot*, p.30; and, Arnold Wright and Thomas H. Reid, *The Malay Peninsula, A Record of British Progress in the Middle East*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912, p. 277.

¹⁸ Macdonald, *Imperial Patriot*, p. 31.

¹⁹ Nasution and Lubis, *Kinta Valley*, p. 99.

Baker the Philanthropist and Imperial Patriot

During the First World War, Baker led a campaign to purchase military aircraft for Britain. This led to the setting up of the Baker Air Fleet Fund, and 20,000 pounds sterling was raised in Malaya and Australia to purchase 94 aircraft (41 Australian and 53 Malayan) for the war effort. In November 1917, he was awarded Commandership of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) as the founder of Malayan Aircraft Fund, and for taking a leading part in stimulating patriotic effort. Baker was indeed dedicated to the expansion and preservation of the British Empire.

Baker retired in 1923 and returned to New Zealand where he bought a sheep station in 1926 called Limestone Downs. He later spent time travelling and in deep sea fishing. In 1940 he returned to Malaya and donated 30,000 thousand pounds sterling for the purchase of six aircraft for the Royal Air Force. He was the biggest private donor for the Malayan War Fund. He died on 8 April 1941 and was buried at the Anglican Church cemetery in Batu Gajah. The Charles Alma Baker Fund was established in 1976 to administer his assets in Malaysia and New Zealand.²⁰

British Economic Activities in the Malay States and the Role of the Colonial Office in Encouraging Investment

Economic Growth under the Residential System

British intervention in Perak under the Pangkor Agreement of 1874 saw the appointment of an official Resident whose advice needed to be sought by the Malay ruler. J.W.W. Birch²¹ was the first Resident of Perak. Later in the same year, British authority was extended to Selangor and Sungai Ujung, and in 1888 to Pahang. Following official intervention, the four Malay States experienced rapid economic growth, with a focus on tin mining and commercial agriculture.

²⁰ *Tokoh-Tokoh Ternama Batu Gajah* [Notable Personalities in Batu Gajah], Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Arkib Negara, 2004, pp. 84-5.

²¹ J.W.W. Birch served as a midshipman in the Royal Navy before joining the Department of the Commissioner of Roads in Ceylon in 1846. He was the Commissioner of Requests and Police Magistrate from 1853-1856. From 1858-1867 he was the Assistant Government Agent in various provinces before becoming Government Agent for the Eastern Province in 1868. In 1870 he became the Colonial Secretary, Straits Settlements and in 1874 became the Resident of Perak. He was murdered in Lower Perak in November 1875. Emily Sadka, *The Protected Malay States, 1874-1885*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968, p. 387.

Prior to the Federation, the Resident represented the highest executive authority in the state. He had under him a secretariat; and enjoyed close contact with the head of every department. The District Officers were responsible for every branch of administration in their respective districts. They were in charge of matters relating to land, collection of rental and taxes, and control of Sanitary Boards. They also acted as magistrates. The assistant District Officers were in charge of sub-districts or a department within a large district.

From 1874 onwards, attempts were made to encourage capital flow in the Malay States. Various steps were taken to encourage mining and agriculture. British policy on the whole could be classified as *laissez-faire*. They did not interfere in the affairs of the Europeans and the Chinese immigrants who were involved in the mining sector. If there was intervention, it was only to protect business interests.²²

The principal source of revenue for the four states was the export duty on tin. The second was the duty imposed on imported opium, and the third source was on the import duties on spirits and the exclusive right to manufacture them for native consumption.²³ The Government's revenue was also acquired from land in the form of quit rent and premium. The revenue from services was gathered from postal, telegraphic and railway services. Between 1875 and 1896, tin was the main revenue earner (\$25,989,664), followed by railway services (\$6,726,48); land (\$3,528,600); and the postal

²² This could be seen in the case of the Federated Malay States (Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang). In these states, the natives and the immigrants did not perceive the British as interfering in their local affairs. In the agricultural sector, the British encouraged the importation of immigrants. See Yip Yat Hoong, *The Development of the Tin Mining Industry of Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1969, p. 67. In 1853, in order to encourage exports, the duties for the export of tin to England were repealed. The formation of secret societies among the Chinese was not prohibited by the British. The secret societies became a tool to recruit Chinese labourers and played the role of a police force to maintain peace and order in the mines. Beside this, the British also encouraged road building and other infrastructure development. Until 1895, the British Government gave licenses to miners to operate tin mines which encompassed a small area (although it was uneconomic). This was done to encourage small scale industry and to help Chinese miners who were accustomed to mining using labour intensive methods. See Wong Lin Ken, *The Malayan Tin Industry to 1914*, Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1965, p. 56. All these measures were seen as part of the *laissez-faire* policy. Also see Sadka, *The Protected Malay States*, pp. 336-7 and 348-9. Efforts by the Government to encourage investors in the Malay States are also discussed in detail; see *ibid.* pp. 336-7. For the performance of European firms from 1870-1890; see *ibid.* pp. 348-9.

²³ F. A. Swettenham, 'British Rule in Malaya', in P.H. Kratoska, ed., *Honourable Intentions: Talks on the British Empire in South-East Asia Delivered at the Royal Colonial Institute, 1874-1928*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp.183-9.

and telegraph industries (\$624,459).²⁴ In terms of states, Perak ranked as the top revenue earner, followed by Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang.

Colonial Office Policy With Regard to Investments Following British Intervention in the Malay States

Since intervention, the Colonial Office policy with regards to investment in the Malay States was a positive one. The despatch sent by the Colonial Secretary, Lord Kimberly, to the Governor of Straits Settlements on 14 January 1881 made explicit Colonial Office policies. According to Kimberly:

Her Majesty's Government would view with satisfaction that the intercourse between the Straits Government and the Malay States should assume a character of more intimate friendship, but no measures involving a change in the relations of those States to the British Government, beyond what is already sanctioned, should be taken without instructions from home; except for temporary purposes in case of urgent necessity. ... The general policy which should be pursued is to avoid annexation, to encourage the Native Rulers to govern well and improve their territories, and only interfere when misgovernment reaches such a point as seriously to endanger the peace and the prosperity of the Peninsula.²⁵

It could be interpreted that prosperity refers to progress and 'the emphasis was on the attainment of orderly government and the promotion of economic enterprise'.²⁶ In February 1883, Kimberly in his private letter to

²⁴ Sadka, *The Protected Malay States*, pp. 410-13.

²⁵ Eunice Thio, *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula 1880-1910*, Vol. 1, Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1969, pp. 17-18. For an understanding of the reasons for intervention in the state of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang, see J. M. Gullick, *Indigenous Political System of Western Malaya*, London: Athlone Press, 1958, pp. 11-18. For an alternative explanation as to why British adopted a more active policy in the Malay states during the 1870s, see Swettenham, *British Malaya*, pp. 173-7; C. D. Cowan, *Nineteenth Century Malaya: Origins of British Control*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 169-75; and, W. D. MacIntyre, 'Britain's Intervention in Malaya: The Origin of Lord Kimberley's Instruction to Sir Andrew Clarke in 1873', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* (JSEAH), Vol. 2, 3 (1961), pp. 47-69. Also, see Khoo Kay Kim, 'J.W.W. Birch: A Victorian Moralizer in Perak's Augean Stable?', *Journal of the Historical Society*, University of Malaya, Vol. 4, 1965/66, 'The Pangkor Engagement of 1874', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (JMBRAS), Vol. LVII, 1 (1974), pp. 1-9, 'The Pangkor Treaty in Malaya', *Peninjau Sejarah*, 1, 1 (1966); and, Anthony Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists, British Imperialism in South East Asia, 1770-1890*, London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1998, pp. 167-200.

²⁶ Thio, *British Policy*, p. 18.

Lord Ripon, Governor General of India requested the latter to facilitate labour inflow into the Malay States.²⁷

Although the Colonial Office was in favour of investments, the officers in the Malay States acted otherwise. This was highlighted by Swettenham in his speech delivered to the Royal Colonial Institute on 31 March 1896: 'Of private European enterprise, except in planting and a few mines, there has been practically none. I think there would have been more if further encouragement had been offered, but some British officials appear to acquire, in the course of service, a habit of looking with suspicion on all their own countrymen who have any official dealing with them.'²⁸ Swettenham also stated that very often the upper class of the officials hindered investment and the subordinates were bogged down by too much red tape.

Swettenham's views were also supported by scholars who had worked on the subject. Emily Sadka rightly pointed out that there were many occasions when the governors and Residents were at loggerheads. There were also cases where the acting governor did not support Swettenham's liberal policy towards investors in the state of Perak. To quote Sadka:

Swettenham himself, when Resident of Perak, felt the force of the Governor's authority when he was confronted in 1890 by an Acting Governor unsympathetic to his policy of open-handed expenditure and unreserved support for entrepreneurs in the states. The Kinta railway extension was held up, though it had been approved in principle by the Governor and Colonial Office ... revenue farmers unable to pay their rents were denied relief despite Swettenham's plea for liberal treatment.²⁹

Economic Growth under the Federation, 1896

The Federation placed the four Malay States (Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang) under one central administration, with a federal executive, a Resident-General as the head. Federation activities led to standardization and uniformity in land and mining law and other aspects of administration from 1896 to 1909. Tremendous growth was seen in the mining and agriculture sectors. The development of agriculture and mining was attributable to the encouragement given by the Federated Malay States Government in the form of liberal land concessions; as well as special land regulations introduced after 1900. By the 1906 land terms, the quit rent on

²⁷ BM adda MS Ripon Papers 43523 Vol. XXXIII Kimberly to Ripon, 23rd February 1883, quoted from Thio, *British Policy*, p. 19.

²⁸ Swettenham, 'British Rule in Malaya', p. 193.

²⁹ Sadka, *The Protected Malay States*, p. 154.

agricultural land exceeding ten acres was fixed at \$1 per acre per annum, rising to \$3-\$4 according to its classification.³⁰ Through the application of the *lalang* clause the state confiscated large tracts of abandoned land belonging to Chinese shifting cultivators.³¹ The government also established a Planters' Loan Fund which made large loans available cheaply and easily. At the request of the United Planters' Association of Malaya (UPAM) in 1904, the state authorized a loan fund of half a million dollars as capital to be lent out to bona fide planter applicants at 6 % interest. By the end of 1904, a total of 11 applications with loans valued at \$149,350 had been received.³² The British administration also created a conducive environment that encouraged both agriculture as well as mining. Efforts were made to encourage infrastructural development in areas such as drainage, roads, railways and bridges with a view to boosting the plantation and mining economy.

It is also interesting to note that, from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century more European estates and mines were opened in the Malay States, and both planters and miners played a vital role in promoting investments, and had a bigger say in government policy.³³ The number of Europeans also increased in the Malay States. In 1911, the number of Europeans in the Federated Malay States totalled 3284, most of whom were based in Perak and Selangor.³⁴ In 1901 the number of Europeans involved in agriculture, mining and commerce totalled 899. This figure increased to 2112 in 1911. This could explain why there was a big change in British policy with regards to investment in the Malay States.

Colonial Office Policy with Regards to Investment from 1896

With regards to Colonial Office policies pertaining to investment in the Malay States, Joseph Chamberlain, the secretary of state for the colonies in 1896 clearly stated that the policy of the Colonial Office was to encourage more commercial enterprise in the Malay States.³⁵ In a letter to C. P. Lucas, assistant under secretary, J. A. Swettenham, the colonial secretary of Straits Settlements clearly mentioned that 'the duty of the Colonial Office and

³⁰ Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 95.

³¹ J. C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968, p. 235.

³² J. H. Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya, 1876-1922: The Genesis of the Industry*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 39.

³³ J. G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880-194: The Social History of European Community in Colonial South-East Asia*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979, pp.14-18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁵ Joseph Chamberlain to the High Commissioner, C. B. H. Mitchell, HCO, 31/1896.

Resident-General is to promote the agricultural wealth of the peninsula and to stimulate and multiply its product. To this end, every great care should be taken not to discourage intending planters'.³⁶

In fact, Lucas wrote that Governor Sir Charles Mitchell's decision to promote cultivation in the Malay States was welcomed. According to him, 'the governor was right to do everything he could to attract European settlers and promote cultivation in an under populated country of great potential wealth'.³⁷ Mitchell was said to have gone out of his way to assert that he and the Colonial Office supported liberal concessions to applicants who had raised money in England for coconut, coffee and rice mills in the Malay States.³⁸

From the above statements it is clear that the policy of the Colonial Office was to encourage investments in the Malay States. The Colonial Office was willing to help in whatever ways possible to promote investment in the Malay States. In fact, when the Federation was formed, the Resident-General was hoping that the High Commissioner would make every effort to promote investment in the FMS. This was clearly stated in the *Federated Malay States Annual Report*. According to the Resident-General, 'One of the objectives of the Federation was to give the Governor (now appointed High Commissioner for the Malay States) an adviser who would speak in sympathy with the interests and aspirations of the Malay States and those enjoyed [*sic*] in developing them, whether as officials, planters, miners or traders'.³⁹

³⁶ Letter from J. A. Swettenham to C. P. Lucas, Secretary of State dated 7th February 1896, CO 273/313.

³⁷ R. Heussler, *British Rule in Malaya: The Malayan Civil Service and its Predecessors, 1867-1942*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981, p.17.

³⁸ Another interesting point to note is the perception that planters with good connection in England, namely the Colonial Office would have the support of the secretary of state, Governors, Residents-General and Residents. See correspondences forwarded by Swettenham to Lucas, 15 June 1898, 273/240, including personal letters from Major Charles Lambton, owner of a coffee estate in Negeri Sembilan, to Perak Resident E.W. Birch and from H.W. Ashly, manager of the Cheviot Estate, Seremban to E.W. Birch. Lambton was also in direct contact with Lord Selbourne, under secretary of state. Swettenham assured C.P. Lucas, assistant undersecretary that the government would share the cost of building a road to Lambton's Estate. See also Swettenham to Under Secretary of State, 13 March 1898, 273/245, on supporting a company that was building steam tramways in Negeri Sembilan and between Selangor and Pahang. It was said that planters and miners were assisted with land concession with favourable terms, supported with labour, and the Colonial Office also shared the cost of building roads and railway lines. See Heussler, *British Rule in Malaya*, pp. 17-18.

³⁹ Resident-General to High Commissioner Sir C.B.H. Mitchell, *Annual Report, Federated Malay States, 1897*.

Baker's Uneasy Role under the Residential System and Federation

From the backdrop of British administration under the Residential System to Federation and thereafter, it is clear that the Colonial Office encouraged investments in the Malay States but that the High Commissioner, Residents-General, Residents and local officials such as the Collectors and Warden of Mines seemed to have their respective policies which were contradictory. A number of cases will be highlighted to show the kind of problem faced by Baker in the state of Perak.

Survey

Charles Alma Baker vs. Kinta Land Office

Baker's problem with British administrators began since his contract surveying days in the early 1890s. Kinta Land Office questioned his accuracy of surveying and completion of mapping requirements. Baker had a problem with W.P. Hume, the land officer of Kinta who accused Baker of hiring surveyors who were dishonest. In a number of cases Baker's fees were cut and he had to appeal to the British Resident.⁴⁰

The actual reason why Baker had problems speeding up his work was that he found it difficult to recruit able officers to help him with the survey work. The government paid a meagre sum and not many were attracted to the work. However, Baker was able to prove to the Resident that he was the victim of official harassment and not incompetent in his work. In fact E.W. Birch, the Resident of Perak in 1897 did recognize the fact that Baker 'did a great mass of work and the great mass of it is good'.⁴¹

The above case is a classic example of how genuine private surveyors like Baker had to face problems with officials, despite the fact that it was the official policy of the Government to encourage capital flow in the state. Baker's work led to an increase in the number of land titles approved. In 1893 alone, 240 titles for 4492 acres of mining land and 57 leases for 882 acres of agricultural land were issued.⁴²

⁴⁰ Baker to District Magistrate, 15th November 1896, KLO 1020/97.

⁴¹ Baker to District Magistrate, 15th November 1896, KLO 1020/97.

⁴² *Perak Government Gazette, 1894* quoted from Ho, *Generations*, pp. 56-7.

Planting

Charles Alma Baker vs. Acting High Commissioner (AHC)

Problems between Baker and the AHC came to the fore in 1894 when Baker applied for 10,000 acres of agricultural lease, 5000 acres of which was at the south of Batu Gajah in the district of Kinta Valley. Although the Resident, Ernest Birch, welcomed Baker's intention to plant para rubber (*hevea brasiliensis*) on liberal terms (rent was to be free for ten years; export duty did not exceed a quarter per pound and a quarter of the land had to be cleared every year) but the AHC, Frank Swettenham, imposed additional conditions. One of the conditions was that if any of the land remained unplanted by the end of the rent-free period, the whole 10,000 acres would revert to the government without compensation for the work done to improve the land, and that Baker should not plant *hevea brasiliensis* in his estate.⁴³ Frank Swettenham on the other hand favoured *gutta rambong* and *caera* varieties of rubber.

Due to such stipulations, Baker abandoned his project. In this case, the man on the spot, namely Resident Birch, apparently shared a different opinion from the AHC. The unofficial explanation was that Swettenham's horse was poisoned by eating *hevea brasiliensis* and that made him oppose the planting of new rubber.⁴⁴

Charles Alma Baker vs. Resident

Baker also had problems with Resident C.W.H. Cohcrane who rejected his application for a plantation loan amounting to 20,000 dollars to work his Kinta Valley Estate in 1908.⁴⁵ He was only given 5000 dollars as the first instalment at 6% interest. Baker was not satisfied with the offer, so he applied for an additional loan on 25 April 1908.

Resident Cohcrane did not approve Baker's request on the grounds that the latter did not work his land to satisfaction. This information was conveyed to the Resident by the District Officer after visiting Baker's estate. What puzzled Baker was that no proper report was submitted to the Resident to ascertain whether he worked his estate to the satisfaction of the state.⁴⁶ Baker even went to the extent of providing other forms of security for the planting loan, if the government were not satisfied with the estate security. Baker had spent 6,592.53 dollars over and above the first instalment of 5000 dollars granted by the government. He also mentioned in detail supported by

⁴³ Mcdonald, *Imperial Patriot*, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Nasution and Lubis, *Kinta Valley*, p. 55.

⁴⁵ British Resident to State Treasurer, Perak, 23rd March 1908, KLO, 233/1908.

⁴⁶ Acting British Resident to Resident General, 4th June 1908.

evidence, the amount of work he had so far carried out in his estate. In fact his estate was worth 20,000 pounds sterling. Baker also raised the issue as to why he was not given a report about the condition of the estate and about the person who had made the report—whether that individual was an experienced planter himself who understood the work done on the estate and the labour force employed. Moreover Baker was not informed of the inspector's visit. Baker felt that in all fairness to himself and the government, it would be wise for the government to appoint planting experts (either the Director of Agriculture or Inspector of Plantation) to report on his estate.⁴⁷

Baker brought the matter to the attention of the High Commissioner who then noted: 'British Resident, I have seen Mr. Baker. His application appears to deserve consideration.'⁴⁸ Baker was finally granted the second instalment of the 20,000 loan of on 27 June 1908. This is yet another case of officials not being forthcoming in encouraging capital flow in the Malay States.

Charles Alma Baker vs. District Officer

In yet another case Baker faced problems with administrators at a lower level: the DOs. This happened when Baker applied for 3000 acres of agricultural land for himself and 640 acres for his friend at Kinta Valley. Officials at the District Office at Batu Gajah rejected his application in 1906 as being merely intended for the purpose of speculation. But the Resident, Ernest Birch, intervened and allowed Baker to take up 2,000 acres on the usual conditions.⁴⁹

After nine months of waiting, Baker's application was approved and the land was developed, using the profits from Lano. Within two years Baker cleared almost 1000 acres of Kinta Valley Estate which he planted with rubber.⁵⁰

This is a clear case of misjudgement of Baker's motive on the part of the District Officer. It was not in line with the spirit of Federation, namely to encourage investments in the state. The Resident and District Officer were clearly indifferent towards Baker.

⁴⁷ Alma Baker to Secretary to Resident, 14th June 1908, KLO, 233/08.

⁴⁸ HC to British Resident, KLO, 233/1908.

⁴⁹ Birch to District Officer Kinta, 30 June 1906, KLO 770/1906 quoted from Macdonald, *Imperial Patriot*, pp. 40-1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Mining

Charles Alma Baker vs. Resident-General

Conflict between investors and officials was evident in the case of Baker wanting to introduce the dredging system in Perak. The introduction of the dredging system was bound to contribute greatly towards the development of the state.⁵¹

In his efforts to introduce the dredging system, Baker made an application on 10 April 1901 for a concession of mining land.⁵² Baker faced some difficulties from the Resident in regard to this application. However, following the recommendations of the Geologist, Senior Warden and State Engineer, Baker was granted 400 acres of land. On 12 December 1902, Baker applied for a prospecting license over 800 acres, which was over and above the original concession. Although initially the prospecting license was approved, it was unfortunate that the license was never granted to him. This was despite the fact he was made to wait for more than one whole year. The application was delayed in the Kinta Land Office for some 18 months 'on account of Sakai claims.' Finally his application was cancelled, and the land was handed back to the Sakais.

Baker was shocked, for he had not anticipated such a turn of events. He had spent a great deal of his own money on prospecting tin, and he stood to lose a fortune through this misadventure. He had complied with terms for which he was granted the concession to prospect tin over the 800 acres which was approved by the Resident.

The District Officer then enquired whether the Resident would grant Baker a prospecting license elsewhere. When the acting Resident forwarded Baker's application (for a prospecting license over an alternative site covering some 800 acres), the Resident-General replied on 26 May 1904 that since the Kinta mining application book was still closed, Baker should not be authorized to select an alternative area for prospecting purposes. When Baker asked for a reconsideration of his application, the acting Resident informed him by letter dated 30 July 1904 that if he was dissatisfied with the Resident-General's decision, his remedy was to send a petition to the High Commissioner.

In his letter, the Resident informed the High Commissioner about a petition that was sent by E.T.C. Garland, Baker's attorney. The Resident also mentioned that the petitioner wanted the High Commissioner to reconsider

⁵¹ 'Application by Mr. Alma Baker for a concession of land for dredging by an Australian and New Zealand Process', Acting Resident-General, Federated Malay States to Acting High Commissioner, Federated Malay States, 17th June, 1901, HCO, 1142/1901.

⁵² 'Précis of Correspondence on Mr. Alma Baker's Prospecting License Under a Dredging Scheme', 10 April 1901, HCO 856/1905.

the decision made by the Resident-General.⁵³ Baker's argument was that he had presented the details of his application to the Resident-General, and it was not fair for him to have cancelled the application. According to Baker:

Seeing that a large amount of money was spent in prospecting by me and through no fault of mine one selection was refused owing to Sakai claims which I think I am right in saying was the first time such a precedent occurred in mining matters. Further I would state that it is to the Government's interest to encourage dredging and having spent so much money in prospecting for this purpose I think I am entitled to greater consideration.⁵⁴

In his letter of 26 April 1905 to R. Clayton Esq, collector of land revenue, Baker pointed out why his application should be seriously considered by the Resident-General. As mentioned earlier, he had once faced problems over the Resident-General's decision in the matter of 400 acres of dredging concession. Baker believed he was justly entitled to the area laid down in the original concession on the following grounds:

1. That he complied with all the terms of the concession for the area he was allowed to prospect.
2. Under the mining enactment an area granted was not to be restricted to one prospecting license.
3. He had spent \$4,000 out of his own pocket for prospecting the areas concerned.
4. For years he had taken a very keen interest in dredging and was most anxious to undertake it in Perak.

When the matter was referred to the High Commissioner by the Resident-General, the former felt he was unable to interfere in the matter.⁵⁵ The High Commissioner's reply revealed his feeling that Baker had been victimized or else he would have endorsed the decision of the Resident and the Resident-General. In fact he called upon the Resident-General to inform Mr. Garland that after considering the matter he regretted that he was unable to interfere. The whole issue highlighted the fact that Baker had been victimized. The decision not to grant the mining land should have been made from the beginning and not at such a late hour as Baker had experienced.

⁵³ Resident-General to High Commissioner, 24 June 1905, HCO, 1142/1901.

⁵⁴ Letter by Alma Baker's attorney, E.T.C. Garland to the Secretary to the Resident, Perak, 27 May 1905, HCO, 1142/1901.

⁵⁵ High Commissioner to Resident-General dated 24 June 1905, HCO, 1142/1901. John Anderson was the High Commissioner of the FMS from 1904-10.

Charles Alma Baker vs. Warden of Mines

In yet another case, Baker, along with his partners, Kennedy, Yeats and Mathews felt cheated when their application for 350 acres of land for hydraulicing with water rights at Jelentoh, Gopeng on 13 December 1899 was rejected by the warden of mines on 2 February 1904.⁵⁶ The reason given was that there was no water available, and that the land was therefore unworkable. Baker was furious because without his knowledge, the land with water rights was later (before 1904) granted to Messrs. Osborne and Chappel.

Baker made a request that he be allowed to cancel his earlier applications and make a new choice elsewhere. He sustained losses in terms of money and time because of the delay. He therefore requested to be allowed to select 350 acres of concession either inside or outside the auction area. The secretary to the Resident granted his request.⁵⁷

The point about the case that needs to be looked into was that if the government had been prompt in replying to Baker, he would have floated a company and worked on tin productively elsewhere. What was most disturbing was that the land and water rights he had applied for was given to Messrs. Osborne and Chappel without any reference to Baker who had made his application four years earlier.⁵⁸

Evaluation

From the cases presented, one cannot deny that officials in the state of Perak had not been kind to Baker. The British officials of the time felt that investors and capitalists should also be philanthropists.⁵⁹ Given such a mindset, it is no surprise that Baker had problems with the Kinta Land Office over his application for land. This is indeed surprising, as the revenue of Kinta, the most important and the richest district in the Federation, was about five million dollars, which was double that of Negeri Sembilan and Pahang put together.⁶⁰ According to E.J. Brewster, the senior officer of the FMS Service

⁵⁶ Alma Baker to Kinta Land Office, 3rd March 1904, KLO 211/1904.

⁵⁷ Secretary to Resident to the Secretariat, 14th March 1904, KLO 1528/04.

⁵⁸ Alma Baker to Resident General, 3rd March 1904, KLO 1528/04.

⁵⁹ 'Some Government officers have a rooted objection to anyone making money; they appear to think that what a planter or a miner makes is stolen from the Government and they also seem to imagine that capitalists, European or otherwise, are philanthropical individuals whose only aim is to come to the Equator with all they have and there get rid of it as soon as possible, putting a considerable quantity of their too-superfluous funds in the Government Treasury.' Excerpt from 'Planting in the Malay States', *Perak Pioneer*, 10 October 1894.

⁶⁰ *Federated Malay States Annual Report, 1905*, p. 5.

in charge of Kinta District, Kinta contributed half the revenue of Perak.⁶¹ In 1907, the amount of land revenue collected in the FMS amounted to \$1,701,682, of which Perak contributed \$798,038; Selangor \$603,854; Negeri Sembilan \$205,642 and, Pahang \$94,148. The district that contributed most to this revenue was the Kinta District in Perak with \$305,755.⁶²

On 14 May 1905, the British Resident wrote to the Kinta District Office, requesting a complete list of Baker's unsettled interests and the status of some of the appeal cases he filed at Kinta Land Office. The reply given by the DO summed up the latter's attitude towards Baker. While replying with a list of the file names⁶³ the DO strongly felt it was better to 'keep in view' (KIV) all the cases to avoid confusion. To quote DO, 'So long as this paper is kept in view there can't be much more confusion over Baker's thing.'⁶⁴ In other words the DO was not willing to probe further into Baker's claim.

KIV in the administrative terms of those days was understood by British officials to mean staying aloof from making an assertion on a particular matter. To quote Rimba:

It is said that when officials are rather fogged over a question raised by the mercantile, mining or planting community, they acknowledged receipt of the original letter, and then on their own paper write the mystic letters 'KIV'; which being interpreted by those in the know are said to mean 'Keep in View'. How simple, short and nice, but it is rumoured that in this way not a few important documents sometimes go astray, by being kept indefinitely in view.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Baker was indeed a prominent figure in Malaya before World War II and particularly in Kinta. In 1894, the *Perak Pioneer* described him as the richest man in the state of Perak.⁶⁶ He had risen from a hard beginning and was able to establish himself as a competent surveyor, planter, and miner. He was successful in all three areas. Nevertheless, he faced administrative hurdles in the Malay States from the 1890s until World War I. It was a time when the

⁶¹ *Perak Administration Report, 1908*, p.5.

⁶² *Federated Malay States Annual Report, 1907*, p.12.

⁶³ The cases were KLO 950/02; KLO 102/99; KLO 543/02; KLO 363/05; KLO 90/04; KLO 555/05; KLO 0903/03; KLO 347/03; KLO 473/04; KLO 1051/04; KLO 211/04; KLO 879/99; KLO 283/99; KLO 212/04; KLO 360/05; KLO 695/03; KLO 543/02; KLO 815/03; KLO 595/04.

⁶⁴ DO Kinta's minute dated 29th May 1905.

⁶⁵ Rimba, *Bygone Selangor*, Kuala Lumpur, 1922.

⁶⁶ *Perak Pioneer*, 9th January 1895.

Federation system was at its height. Baker was victimized administratively by the British officials who envied his success, a conclusion that is reached not merely on the strength of just one or two cases but far too many. The spirit of the Federation required that investments be encouraged by all means possible, but Baker's case proved otherwise.