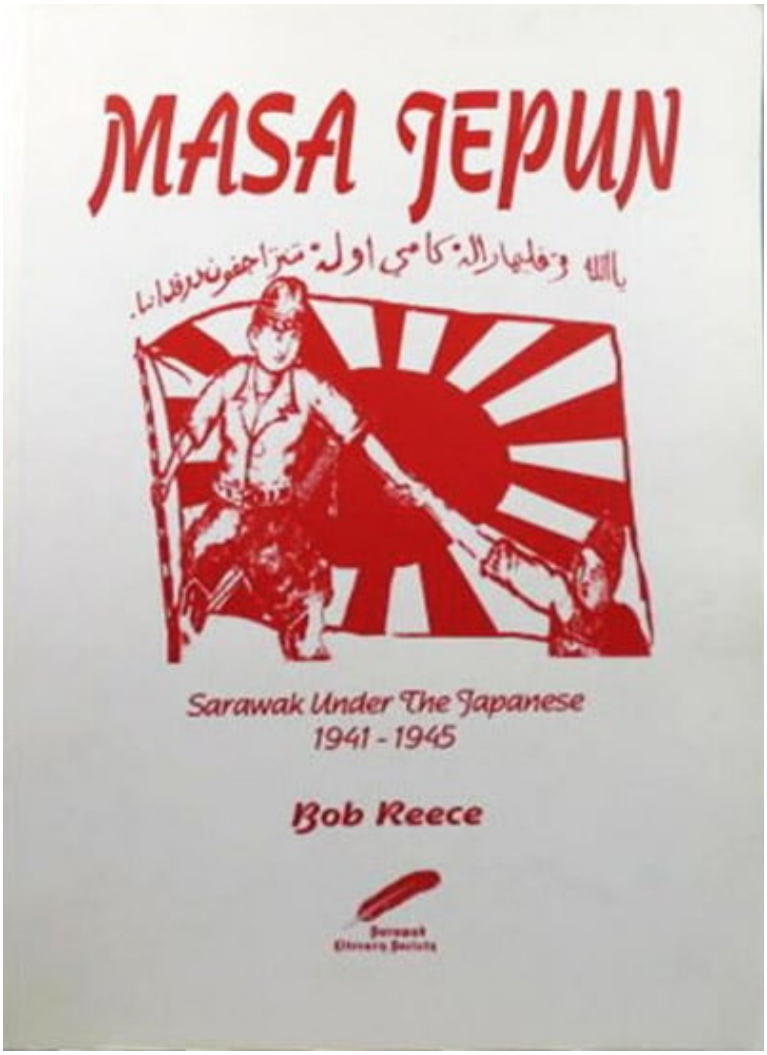
Sarawak Under Japanese Occupation

by [Billy Corr](#) (March 2024)



Masa Jepun: Sarawak under the Japanese, Bob Reece (R.H.W. Reece) Publisher: Sarawak Literary Society (Persatuan Kesusasteraan Sarawak) Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, 1998.

By the early 1940s, the European Empires in the East were

hollow façades, their once-awesome power based more on shadow than on substance and on bluff rather than solid strength. Imperial Japan, allied to the European Axis partners, was in the mood for adventure but lacked resources. The Bornean state of Sarawak, inhabited by Dayaks, Chinese and Malays and over twenty other ethno-cultural groups and, preposterously, ruled by the Brooke clan and administered by a tiny handful of Britons, beckoned like a ripe fruit. By any standards, prewar Sarawak was a bizarre anomaly; an independent state whose ruler and officials were British citizens, a unique part of the British Empire, a protectorate of the Empire which had been ruled by one family for three generations.

Reece writes in his 1998 book, *Masa Jepun: Sarawak Under The Japanese, 1941-1945*:

> *While it seems harsh to label the Brookes and their officers as keepers of an anthropological garden, there was something essentially feudal and self-serving about their administration. They were instinctively opposed to change because they sensed that it would undermine their status vis-à-vis the natives … 'the interests of the natives' required that Europeans should remain indefinitely as their guardians. In this sense they were all 'white rajahs', or 'little tin gods', as the last Rajah himself called them in 1946.*

All that was needed to galvanise a predatory Imperial Japan into southwards action, initially hesitant and cautious but subsequently daring, even reckless, was the German conquest of Holland and France and the consequent British pre-occupation with the survival of the mother country, then threatened with what appeared to be imminent invasion. Pressured and friendless, in 1940 the Vichy French grudgingly and

reluctantly acquiesced in the installation of Japanese garrisons in northern Indochina (read Nicholas Tarling's brilliant book *A Sudden Rampage* for a full discussion of this period).

While the Japanese move was ostensibly intended to isolate Chiang Kaishek's embattled Chungking régime and choke off China's supply line from Haiphong and Hanoi, the quite unintended and unanticipated consequence was to provoke the U.S.A. into embargoing steel and scrap exports to Japan. Worse was to come; in June 1941 Japanese garrisons were established in southern Indochina, clearly threatening Malaya and the Dutch Indies. Alarmed and infuriated, the Americans, the British and the Dutch government (by this time in exile in London, but still the effective authority over all Dutch overseas possessions) froze Japanese assets and halted sales of oil to Japan. Facile apologists for Japanese actions in this period conveniently ignore the two-part Indochinese episode, the true *causus belli* of the Greater East Asian War of 1941-1945.

By 1941, the Brooke Raj in Sarawak had become a century-old anachronism. Benignly disinterested, unprogressive and lackadaisical rule by a handful of foreigners was all well and good in the 1880s but sixty years later it was a conspicuous embarrassment to London. Still, like Brunei and the Dutch Indies, obscure and mildly ludicrous Sarawak possessed oil, the essential sinew of mechanised war, in seeming abundance in the coastal field at Miri. Indeed, Japanese warships had fuelled at Miri during the 1914-1918 war.

The oilfields of Borneo, like those of Java, were briskly seized soon after the outbreak of war and during the subsequent Japanese occupation, sabotage damage was competently repaired, production was resumed and the output from the Sarawak and Brunei fields amounted to over eleven million barrels. After the war the British government paid heavy compensation to Shell for the damage to both facilities.

The occupation of Sarawak, which was to last for three years and eight months, became grimly oppressive once the tide of war turned against Japan in 1942-3; imports and trade ground to a standstill, the upriver Ibans and other Sarawak natives perforce reverted to a subsistence economy and involuntarily-conscripted Javanese and Shanghai Chinese, *romusha*, were used as slave labour in shipyards and airfield construction gangs, thousands of them perishing.

Then largely unschooled, primitive, rural and wholly apolitical, the Ibans, who were then and still are the largest single ethno-cultural group in Sarawak, initially collaborated hesitantly with the new rulers. Most aristocratic Malays, traditionally the minor civil servants under the Brooke Raj, collaborated enthusiastically in the early days of the occupation, as did their coreligionists, the Muslim Javanese. A ghastly paradox was that immense numbers of Javanese were conscripted as *romusha*, slave labour, with Ahmed Sukarno's reluctant consent, and dispatched to work throughout the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, including Sarawak and the appalling Siam-Burma railway, where they died in uncounted tens of thousands. One consequence of the Chinese boycott of Japanese goods between 1937 and 1941, both within unoccupied China itself and also throughout Southeast Asia, was the draconian collective financial punishment inflicted on the Sarawak Chinese, who had been enthusiastic contributors to the China Relief Fund and boycotters of Japanese goods. The Sarawak Chinese escaped the systematic massacres inflicted on the Chinese of Singapore, however.

During the occupation, radios were confiscated and a rudimentary system of education in Japanese was begun in the larger towns. Always short of manpower, the Japanese imposed indirect rule where possible, including the promotion of Ibans, and strenuous efforts were made to encourage food production.

Enraged by the exactions of the Japanese military, the

disappearance of trade goods and the confiscation of their hunting guns, many Iban in Dutch Borneo and Sarawak rebelled early in 1945. By this time, Australians and Britons were fomenting insurrection among the Kelabit animists in the all-but-inaccessible Bario highlands, having been landed there by parachute from the Celebes (Tom Harrisson's *World Within* of 1959 is the definitive text). Once sufficiently enraged, armed and encouraged to collect and smoke-dry heads for display in their longhouses once again, the Iban tribesmen became formidable and remorseless foes. Only the restraining influence of the Iban tribal leadership prevented greater carnage, as Sutlive's *Tun Jugah of Sarawak* records. In a number of instances, there were insufficient Japanese heads to go around, so hapless Chinese, Malays and Bornean-born Indians were briskly decapitated as towns and villages were bloodily 'liberated.' To this day, according to Dr. Reece, there are Japanese heads at the Tedong longhouse at Merirai and at Penghulu Sungai longhouse opposite Sungai Pila on the river Rajang.

Almost the last act of the war, commencing in June 1945, was the astounding retreat of the Japanese from coastal Sarawak, Brunei and British North Borneo, now Sabah, into the forbidding interior of Borneo. With a single-minded devotion worthy of a far better cause and wholly without guides, porters, adequate supplies or even accurate maps, parties of soldiers, oilfield workers, assorted civilians and nurses pioneered seemingly impossible routes through dense jungle never traveled on foot before or since. Their mortality was appalling; of one group of 600 from the Seria oilfield in Brunei, 280 survived the trek and finally surrendered to the Australians on October 28th 1945.

The last major armed conflict was at Bah Kalalan in the Bario highlands on October 31st 1945; over 500 armed Japanese surrendered to Major Harrisson's Australians and tribal irregulars. This was long after Douglas McArthur was

comfortably installed in Tokyo. Ignoring unconfirmed reports that the war had ended, some Japanese units took up residence in caves in Dutch Borneo and were discovered two years after the end of the war. Other Japanese, in the Philippines and on Guam, resisted far longer.

Tidying up the aftermath of war in northern Borneo took quite a time. At the end of 1946, Major Tom Harrisson strolled into Allied headquarters on the coast, accompanied by his cheery batman-cum-handyman, supposedly the very last of the stray Japanese from the interior.

Some fine histories are labours of love, doomed to be published in obscurity in a single limited-run edition and, eventually, all-but-impossible to locate. This work, alas, is one such. Bob Reece, a historian at Murdoch University in Western Australia, knows Sarawak well and has filled a gap in Borneo studies which neatly complements his definitive 1982 book *The Name of Brooke: The End of White Rajah Rule in Sarawak.* As well as consulting innumerable documentary sources, Dr. Reece interviewed scores of eye-witnesses in Sarawak, the U.K., Australia and Japan. By now, some of them are one with eternity; Dr. Reece neatly and astutely forestalled the grim reaper.

Masa Jepun is a superb and quite inimitable book and one which deserves far wider readership than it is likely to receive.

To obtain copies of this book, e-mail Dr. Reece: breece (at) central.murdoch.edu.au

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Billy Corr is a former university and college teacher. He has lived and worked in many lands and, quite unforgettably, ran

away from a war in Libya a decade ago. He now is a resident of Siem Reap in the sunny kingdom of Cambodia. His book, *Adams the Pilot* [Routledge, 1995] is about the first Briton known to have lived in Japan. It has now been reissued in a paperback edition.

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