



SIR RICHARD WINSTEDT

RICHARD OLAF WINSTEDT¹

1878–1966

RICHARD OLAF WINSTEDT was born at Oxford on 2 August 1878, the son of a naturalized Swede and an English mother, Sarah Castell, of a family found for centuries in and near Oxford. His younger brother Eric gained a demys-hip to Magdalen College, and as an undergraduate created a sensation in the academic world by discovering hitherto unknown lines of Juvenal in a Bodleian Library manuscript. Richard, perhaps from the goitre that barred him from athletics, was as bad an examinee as he was abnormally quick in reading. When he was in the sixth form at Magdalen College School, its future head master, C. E. Brownrigg, to whom he always felt indebted, declared that he had forgotten more than the rest of the form had ever read. He entered New College as a Commoner, narrowly missed Mods with an *aegrotat*, but still yellow from jaundice sat the examination. He had left the study of the set books for the last month, and instead of the classics read the whole of Robert Louis Stevenson's then fashionable works; but that last month proved to be one of illness, and Winstedt narrowly missed a First. In Greats, too, he got a Second, being more interested then in English literature than in history or philosophy. He took the Joint Examination for the Home, Indian, and Colonial civil services but, misreading the title of the essay, his special subject, was awarded only half marks, an accident for which he was afterwards grateful for decreeing him a career in Peninsular Malaysia.

He arrived in Perak in December 1902. Many years later he wrote that he was disappointed not to find himself surrounded

¹ This account of Sir Richard Winstedt was first published, together with a full bibliography, in *Malayan and Indonesian Studies: Essays presented to Sir Richard Winstedt on his eighty-fifth birthday* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1964) and is reproduced, in a slightly modified form, by permission of the Delegates of the Press. Information for the essay has been derived from a number of sources, the most important being: Sir Richard Winstedt, 'My Books', *Malaya*, i. 4 (Apr. 1952), 25–6; H. R. Cheeseman, 'Malaya's Debt to Sir Richard Winstedt', *British Malaya*, xxv. 4 (Aug. 1950), 74–6; *Who's Who 1962* (London, 1962), *sub.* Winstedt, Sir Richard; D. D. Chelliah, *A History of the Educational Policy of the Straits Settlements with Recommendations for a New System Based on Vernaculars* (Singapore, 1960). Quotations, unless otherwise indicated, come from the first two sources.

by pirates or threatened by creeses but set instead to index the *Perak Gazette* and help arrange a Christmas bazaar. In his luggage he had brought with him Ruskin's *Modern Painters* and Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* with the intention of essaying novel writing. His literary style had been praised at Oxford, among others by his Greats tutor, Hastings Rashdall, and by a contemporary undergraduate, Compton Mackenzie; and though he later maintained that he subsequently lost this style by producing papers as compact as possible to save the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society from avoidable expenditure on its *Journal*, the basic reason for his omission to essay novels was that he found himself more interested in ideas than in persons. In any event he realized that if he was to compete with Conrad he would first have to learn all he could about the beliefs and customs of the Malays, and that was to occupy him all his life.

In those days cadets in Peninsular Malaysia were given unrivalled opportunities for learning of this sort. During his year as Inspector of Schools in Perak Winstedt saw Europeans only four or five days of every month, so that most of his time was spent in the company of Malays, 'on rafts and elephants, in house-boats and in gharris', laying the foundations of that copious vocabulary which he was later to use with such effect in his dictionaries. It was at this time that he met the lexicographer, R. J. Wilkinson, who proved perhaps the main influence on his life.¹ In 1907 he contributed a paper entitled 'The Literature of Malay Folklore' to Wilkinson's *Papers on Malay Subjects*;² two years later he published two other papers in that series, 'The Circumstances of Malay Life' and 'Malay Industries: Arts and Crafts'. These latter contributions were a direct outcome of his period in Perak, as also were the earlier tales which he had published in *Temple Bar* during 1904-5.

It was while serving as Assistant District Officer in Tapah that Winstedt formed friendships with two remarkable Malays who provided him with a mine of information about Malay lore. The first was Penghulu Raja Haji Yahya of Chendriang, who had

¹ He referred in the introduction of 'A History of Malaya', *JMBRAS* xiii. 1 (1935), to 'Mr. R. J. Wilkinson, C.M.G., whose encouragement and example first turned me to Malay studies nearly thirty years ago'. See also his obituary note to Wilkinson in *ibid.* xx. 1 (1947), 143-4, and his review of Wilkinson's *A Malay-English Dictionary* in *JMBRAS* xi. 2 (1933), 145.

² C. A. Gibson-Hill, 'Notes on the series "Papers on Malay Subjects"', *JMBRAS* xxv. 1 (1952), 194-9.

been styled Perak's Poet Laureate by the former High Commissioner for the Federated Malay States, Sir Frank Swettenham, a designation which the Raja thereafter always subscribed below his signature. He was not only a Malay euphuist, 'who took more pains than a Victorian lady over the nice conduct of his fingers when carrying a tea-cup to his lips', but was also an authority on Malay court ceremonies. It was he who was responsible for introducing to Winstedt Pawang Ana, who had recovered the body of Perak's first British Resident, J. W. W. Birch, after he had been murdered by Malays in 1875. Beginning on Saturday afternoons and ending on Sunday evenings, this old Sumatran warrior recited *Awang Sulong* and other Malay folk-tales while Winstedt took them down. '[N]ever since', he wrote, 'have I wondered at the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* being transmitted *per [ora] virum*.'

Transferred to Matang, Winstedt began collecting material on Malay sea-fishing and a Kedah folk-tale, this time in manuscript, entitled *Trong Pipit*. At Gopeng he suffered from malaria, which had first begun to plague him at Tapah, and he also contracted septicaemia, which reduced his weight to five stone ten pounds. After doctors had despaired of his life, Wilkinson attempted to rally his strength by encouraging him to write a scientific grammar for Peninsular Malay. Winstedt's reply was characteristic: he was quite ignorant of the subject but he was willing to learn it by writing a book. Years later he described how he went about the task: 'I got half a dozen letter-pads and headed the pages *běr- těr- mě-* and so on, inserting under these captions all the sentences where they occurred in half a dozen Malay classics, by which method I found, for example, that the prefix *běr* has exactly the same nuances as the Greek middle.' His memory from his Oxford days of Goodwin's *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb* served him well. The first edition of his *Malay Grammar* was published at the Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1913 and established him at the age of thirty-five among the forefront of British scholars of Malay. His merits were immediately recognized in the University of Leiden, which has always been chary in its praise of British workers in the Malay field, and he was subsequently described in the Federal Council by Raja Chulan as 'the talented inventor of Malay grammar'¹

After long leave, Wilkinson arranged for his protégé to be

¹ There is a well-known Malay saying, 'God gave the Malays their language, and Winstedt gave them their grammar'.

posted to Kuala Pilah so that he might study the matrilineal system, and his voluminous writings on this subject indicate well enough what he accomplished in that line. It was during his stay at Kuala Pilah that he wrote *Colloquial Malay: A Simple Grammar with Conversations* and compiled *An English-Malay Dictionary* which was based on Wilkinson's *Malay-English Dictionary* but contained much original material. The three volumes of this work were published by Kelly and Walsh in Singapore during 1914-17. For the compilation of this dictionary Winstedt had the assistance of a small number of Malay 'word-catchers that lived on syllables'; in addition, by way of incentive, he offered prizes for the best collection of words on buffaloes, ploughing, house-building, and so on. In the same manner he offered holiday prizes to Malay students at Tanjong Malim for the best collection of *pantun* when he was preparing the publication of *Pantun Melayu*, the preface of which excited international interest.

It was because of his knowledge of the Malay language and customs that he was appointed in 1916 Assistant Director of Education in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, to revise and improve the system of Malay vernacular education. For this purpose he was sent, shortly after his appointment, to study the educational systems in Java and the Philippines. As a result of his report the direction of Malay education in the Federation was changed radically, with new textbooks of local interest issued, and greater prominence given to arts and crafts in the curriculum of Malay schools. The teachers' training colleges at Malacca and Matang were amalgamated in 1922 to form the Sultan Idris Training College at Tanjong Malim, and a Malay Translation Bureau was established there to prepare books suited to this new outlook in Malay education. Reporting in 1921 on Winstedt's six years work in the Education Department, E. C. H. Wolff, the Acting Director of Education, stated that it was no exaggeration to say 'that Malay vernacular education [had] been revolutionised. . .'.¹

Winstedt's contributions to education in Malaysia extended far beyond the Malay schools. Between 1924-31 when he was Director of Education his energy and enthusiasm stimulated effort and initiative throughout his Department. He presided over the Educational Conferences held in Kuala Lumpur in

¹ Chelliah, *Short History*, 72. In 1921 Winstedt married Sarah O'Flynn, M.B., Ch.B., of the Colonial Medical Service. She died in 1972.

1923, 1925, and 1928, and the enthusiasm generated at these meetings was largely due to the skill with which he directed the discussions. The late H. R. Cheeseman, who many years later succeeded to the post of Director of Education, has left on record his own assessment of Winstedt's services to Malayan Education:

With zeal no whit inferior to that shown by the most enthusiastic schoolmaster, he studied school organisation and method, ever considering what should be done in the light of local needs and local problems. He collected a team of experts, an Education Headquarters Staff, consisting not only of men capable of advising on general educational problems but also of specialists in physical training, art, music, etc. . . . It is not surprising that as long as an officer of the Malayan Civil Service of his calibre and of his interest in Education filled the post of Director of Education, schoolmasters did not feel embittered by the fact that the Department of Education, unlike other technical departments in the country, was denied technical direction and control. For he made himself an expert in education. When he presided over technical committees on school syllabuses, training class programmes, and the like, the professional officers were amazed by his knowledge and understanding of the technical problems under consideration. He was prepared to toil in the fields as well as direct from the heights. In addition to the readers for the Malay schools for which he was responsible, he wrote (after the 1928 Conference when an appeal for local text-books was made) two readers for English schools, namely *Eastern Tales* and *Right Living and Right Thinking*.

In educational vision and planning Cheeseman ranked him second only to Raffles, and it is interesting to note that the principles of practical education which inspired the latter's reforms in west Sumatra during 1818-24 were basically the same as those propounded by Winstedt for the vernacular schools in Malaysia a century later. He was, in fact, described as a 'second Raffles' on account of his 'love for the Malays and their language, and his enthusiasm for their progress' in the farewell address presented to him by representatives of the teaching profession in Malaysia when he ceased to be Director of Education in 1931.

In assessing Winstedt's work it is important to lay particular emphasis on his contribution to education because it is not generally realized that of his thirty-two years in Malaysia nearly half were spent in the service of the Department of Education. Between 1921 and 31 he was the first President of Raffles College and as such was the chief architect of its fortunes; he also served on the council of the College of Medicine for a number of years,

and in 1928 was Chairman of the Committee on Medical Research which was responsible for endowing the College with funds adequate for its work. His official connexion with education in Malaysia and Singapore came to an end three years later, but between 1936 and 9 he was a member of the Colonial Office Advisory Committee on Education following his retirement from Malaysia in April 1935.

Despite the multifarious official duties connected with the Department of Education and his membership of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council (1924-31), and of the Federal Council of the Federated Malay States (1927-31), Winstedt somehow managed to find time for his studies. In 1925 he published his important book, *Shaman Saiva and Sufi: A Study of the Evolution of Malay Magic*, which essayed to bring order into a subject on which Skeat had collected so many *disjecta membra*. The inspiration for the book, which sought to unravel a highly complex system of magic on the basis of historical and comparative data, derived from the fact that many years previously he had been given as a college prize a three-volume edition of Frazer's *Golden Bough*. It was this particular work and Skeat's *Malay Magic*, which he had discovered shortly after his arrival in Malaysia, that turned his attention to a subject which continued to hold a fascination for him. It was somewhat ironical that after the publication of *Shaman Saiva and Sufi* Frazer should have lifted most of the book into one of his later volumes without permission or acknowledgement except for a brief note to the effect that Winstedt apparently knew his subject; Skeat praised the book, later published under the title *The Malay Magician*, in generous terms.

Shaman Saiva and Sufi was essentially an historical work and history soon began to absorb almost the whole of Winstedt's attention. In 1918 he had produced in collaboration with Daing 'Abdu'l-Hamid bin Tengku Muhammad Salleh the first scientific work on Malay history written in Malay. This was *Kitab Tawarikh Melayu*, and according to Dr. Haji Zainal-Abidin bin Ahmad was 'undoubtedly the book which, by popularising the Arabic word *tawarikh*, first opened the eyes of the average Malay to the meaning of history as distinct from legend'.¹ Winstedt's first full-dress work in this field was 'A History of Johore' which was published in *JMBRAS* in 1932,

¹ R. O. Winstedt and Zainal-Abidin bin Ahmad, 'A History of Malay Literature, with a Chapter on Modern Developments', *JMBRAS* xvii. 3 (1939), 151.

the year following his appointment as General Adviser to that state. Historical monographs on Perak, Selangor, and Negri Sembilan soon followed, and these led in 1935 to the important and in many ways remarkable book, 'A History of Malaya'. Like most of Winstedt's writings of this period this work was written between half-past four and eight o'clock in the morning before the daily routine of his official life began. Only one who has experienced the enervating effects of a tropical climate can appreciate fully the energy that accomplished so much in so many fields.

After serving four years in Johore, Winstedt was offered the post of Reader in Malay at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London. It was during the tenure of this post, which he continued to occupy until his sixty-ninth year, that he published the earliest version of the *Sĕjarah Mĕlayu* (*The Malay Annals*) and *A History of Malay Literature*, which led directly to his being elected in 1945 a Fellow of the British Academy, an honour he prized above all his distinctions. He had been appointed a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George in 1926, and nine years later a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. In 1939 he became a member of the Board of Governors of the School of Oriental and African Studies, a post he held for twenty-one years, and in 1940 he was elected for the first time Director of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Three years later he became President of the Society and was re-elected to that office on no less than four occasions. He was, in fact, the first former member of the Colonial Civil Service to have held that distinguished post, and also the first to have been elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

Winstedt's interests and activities were reflected in the wide range of offices he held both in the East and the United Kingdom. In the East his chief relaxation had been yachting, and in 1934 he served as Commodore of the Royal Singapore Yacht Club. Four years later, following his retirement, he was elected President of the Association of British Malaya. In London during the war he broadcast in Malay twice weekly in the Overseas Service of the British Broadcasting Service, and at the same time wrote a remarkable series of articles for the *Daily Telegraph* in which he predicted the fall of Malaya to the Japanese. After 1945, along with Sir Cecil Clementi and Sir Frank Swettenham, he played a leading role in contesting the British Government's attempt to introduce the Malayan

Union, drafting a letter to *The Times* and writing articles on the subject for the *Spectator* and other British periodicals. During 1947-8 he served as Vice-Chairman of the Executive Committee for the Royal Academy's Winter Exhibition of Art from India and Pakistan, and headed a delegation to India to choose the exhibits.

Those same years saw the publication of *The Malays: A Cultural History*, a brilliant piece of incisive writing, and his popular *Malaya and its History*, written at the request of Professor R. Coupland of Oxford University for a series on British Commonwealth History. But Winstedt's chief work in the years of retirement was the compilation of Malay dictionaries, culminating in the unilingual *Kamus Bahasa Melayu* which was published by Marican and Sons in 1960. For his *Malay Grammar* and collection of folk-tales Oxford University conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters, and in 1951, in recognition of his services to education and scholarship, the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws was conferred upon him by the University of Malaya. Four years earlier he had been awarded the triennial Gold Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society.

Winstedt was the last and greatest of the British 'colonial' scholars of Malaysia. He stayed longer in the country than many of his predecessors, and his interests in Malay studies were more comprehensive and penetrating. Those interests were not limited to one or two fields but covered almost the whole range of Malay culture: language, history, economics, arts and crafts, law and religion; only in the field of Malay music did he make no contribution. It is true that he received much stimulus from the works of the older generation of British scholars, especially Wilkinson and Blagden, as well as those by Dutch scholars in the field, but he did not accept their conclusions uncritically and always advanced his own forthright opinions. It is not necessary, of course, to agree with everything that he wrote, especially his interpretations of some Malay proverbs; Malays, moreover, feel that his history was written from a British point of view, and are critical of the fact that all his expository writing was in English. But when everything has been said, Sir Richard Winstedt, as Dr. Haji Zainal-Abidin bin Ahmad has written, has left behind him, 'a high reputation among that small company of Britons whose names are associated with Malaya'.

JOHN BASTIN