



**Lynn Hollen Lees.** *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects: British Malaya, 1786-1941.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 374 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-03840-0.

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Unlike Britain's expansion into other parts of South and Southeast Asia, Britain's movement into Malaya was not by conquest but rather by "invitation shadowed by intimidation" (p. 116). Starting her study in 1786 with Britain's acquisition of Penang, Lynn Hollen Lees, a noted scholar of European social history, traces the spread of British colonialism across the Malay Peninsula until the Japanese occupation in 1941 in her book *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects*. Lees's monograph provides a fresh perspective on British colonialism in Malaya, and the British Empire more generally, by firmly rooting the colonial project within a network of transnational movements that highlights the construction of "a multi-cultural society under the umbrella of British overlords" (p. 1). Her book explores how these transnational movements shaped British Malaya through an analysis of the social history of the parallel developments of plantations and towns across the peninsula. Through this exploration, she interrogates the nature of British colonial governance in Malaya by critiquing such "simple, inflexible categories" as settler colony and directly ruled possession that often dominate the study of empires (p. 6). Lees argues that the British in Malaya "ruled in an environment of layered and shared sovereignty" that created a political landscape that was as complex as it was conflicted (p. 4). Couching her argument

in the study of the individual in rural and urban spaces, Lees investigates how the multi-ethnic populace of British Malaya experienced and adapted to "empire" as they navigated this political landscape. She aims to show how imperial Britain "planted a colony in Malaya and cultivated its inhabitants as British subjects" (p. 16).

Progressing in a largely chronological fashion, the book is divided into two parts. The first section concentrates on the nineteenth century where the author describes the expansion of British colonial rule throughout the Malay Peninsula and the various manifestations of governance exercised by the colonial state. She traces the corresponding growth of plantation colonialism, focusing on sugar cultivation, and the development of urban centers across Malaya. Lees looks at the contrasting styles of British colonial rule that developed within plantations and towns. Grounding her discussion in the papers of the Penang Sugar Estates Company, she explores the "coercive regime" of plantation colonialism that "depended upon physical violence and cultural caricatures to sustain a rigid hierarchy of power and inequality" (p. 99). Built on ideas developed on Caribbean plantations and slavery, plantation colonialism in Malaya was an arena of heavy discipline, low pay, and racial segregation. In contrast, urban populations enjoyed significantly less direct interaction with the coloni-

al state. Rather than the rigid, racial hierarchies of plantations, towns enjoyed an overlapping of social and cultural worlds as their multi-ethnic inhabitants engaged with one another through marketplace interactions and urban civil society. In towns, the British colonial state opted for a mode of governance Lees calls “layered sovereignty” where colonial officials relegated informal control of the various ethnic groups to their community leaders (p. 119). Despite the seemingly insular environments of plantations and towns, the boundaries between them were relatively open and porous. This allowed for the mobile society of British Malaya to move across both the physical and political landscape to experience “multiple layers of imperial rule” (p. 16).

The second section of the book focuses on the first four decades of the twentieth century when British control continued to expand across the Malay Peninsula. The twentieth century saw the rate of urbanization increase, as well as the dramatic transformation of the Malayan economy wrought by the widespread adoption of rubber cultivation. Colonial officials continued their policy of layered sovereignty but found the status quo increasingly difficult to maintain as transnational pressures mounted against colonization (p. 170). Although rubber cultivation transformed Malaya into Britain’s most profitable colony, it also continued the rigid hierarchy and racial segregation of plantations that were developed on the sugar estates of the nineteenth century. As the colonial state sought to raise the standards of workers’ welfare, colonial rule became identified with the un-free labor and violence of plantation agriculture. While racial segregation and violence persisted on rural plantations, the cosmopolitanism fostered in urban centers of the nineteenth century continued into the twentieth century. In urban areas, where colonial surveillance was minimal, the multi-ethnic populace continued to intermingle with one another in a vibrant display of cosmopolitanism. Residents negotiated the fractured world of different alliances and loyalties in urban centers as co-

lonial authorities and ethnic community leaders layered various authorities onto the urban landscape. This “divided sovereignty,” although providing the colonial state a pragmatic means to deal with the challenges of imperial rule, raised the questions of what British subjecthood meant for people living in British Malaya (p. 15).

Lees draws on an expansive array of archival material from Britain, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States to depict the complex nature of British colonialism on the Malay Peninsula. Bolstered by oral history interviews, as well as a multitude of printed primary and secondary sources, her work provides a refreshing perspective on British Malaya by focusing not only on colonial officials but also on workers, managers, merchants, and teachers who comprised Malaya’s cosmopolitan polity. Written in clear and lucid prose, the book generally maintains a fine balance between detailed forays into imperial historiography and engaging vignettes through a thoughtful analysis of her sources. Although grounding her study in an almost exclusively English-language source base, Lees exhibits a keen awareness of the silences and representations found in colonial archives. Her work shows a sensitivity to the subaltern voices that are often lost or obscured in the colonial records. Her meticulous reading of the sources allows her to “shine a spotlight on the vanished worlds of British Malaya” (p. 13). Her narrative pays attention to the often-neglected stories of women, the harsh working conditions faced by Malayan plantation workers, and the financially crippling realities of debt peonage. While she orientates her study on British colonialism in Malaya, Lees also exhibits her interest in world history by incorporating the effects of transnational events into her narrative, such as the atrocities of rubber cultivation in the Belgian Congo. Her work is a richly detailed empirical study that brings to light the diverse world of British Malaya.

Lees's *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects* is a rich and valuable contribution to the historiography of British colonization in Southeast Asia. Her work successfully challenges the reader to scrutinize the categories of imperial governance to highlight the varied and diverse forms of British colonial rule. Situating the "flows of empire" within the transnational currents of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Lees provides scholars with an in-depth look at how the multi-ethnic populace of British Malaya experienced empire through their negotiation of the competing powers and alliances endemic to layered sovereignty. This monograph is a must-read for scholars interested in British colonial rule in Southeast Asia and the nature of British subjecthood.

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