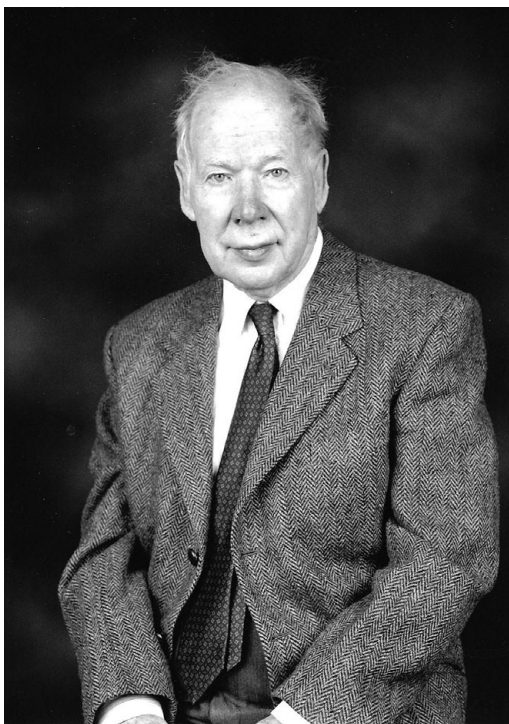

Obituary

John Gullick, 1916–2012



John Michael Gullick (who died at his home in Woodford Green, Essex, on 8 April 2012, aged 96) had careers in the colonial service, business and the law, and was the last in a remarkable line of Malayan scholar-administrators.

Born in Bristol on 6 February 1916, Gullick was not an obvious ‘colonial service type’. His father was employed in the family wholesale coal factor business. His mother, who had been born in China, was the daughter of a medical missionary and at the time of her marriage had been training as a school-teacher. In 1932 the family business crashed and the Gullicks were plunged into genteel poverty. It was, as he would later recall, “the heroic sacrifices” of his parents that ensured a good education for John and his siblings. Having attended a village school in Butcombe (Somerset), where one school-mistress taught all classes from 8 to 14 in

a single room, he won a free place at Taunton School and then an open major scholarship in Classics at Christ's College, Cambridge, where he became captain of college boats and in 1938 graduated with a Double First.

Gullick had once aspired to be a doctor but a degree in Classics pointed to a career in administration. Recoiling from competitive entry to the Home Civil Service and seeing no future in the Indian Civil Service, he settled for the Colonial Administrative Service. His choice was influenced by an interest in colonial questions stimulated by mildly left-wing student politics. Notwithstanding a reputation for 'having ideas', Gullick was accepted by Sir Ralph Furse, the formidable Director of Appointments at the Colonial Office, and assigned to Uganda. On 22 July 1939, after a fourth year at Cambridge on the colonial service course, he embarked from Tilbury for East Africa, one in "an uneasy quartet" of cadets with whom he enjoyed "no very congenial company".

Gullick arrived in Entebbe more or less as war was declared and was immediately given the job of cipher clerk and acting ADC to the governor, Sir Philip Mitchell. Much to his relief he was soon posted up-country as third assistant district commissioner, Teso District. Like most cadets, Gullick found district administration immediately and immensely satisfying. Unlike many colonial officers, however, he also possessed skills to handle the very different challenges of central administration. Indeed, the imperatives of wartime planning followed by those of post-war reconstruction and decolonisation, meant that he would spend far more of his colonial service in the secretariat than in the district office.

In 1940 Gullick was called up for military service with the King's African Rifles and participated in the Abyssinian campaign. When that was over, like many of his kind he was, as he put it, "combed out to do military government", otherwise known as 'civil affairs'. This took him to Cairo, to Vichy-held Madagascar (in order to forestall its seizure by the Japanese) and finally to South East Asia Command. He spent much of 1945 at the Civil Affairs Staff Training Centre in Wimbledon as an instructor to those preparing for the re-occupation of Malaya, and in September he was part of the 100,000-strong invasion force. Although Operation Zipper encountered no opposition, Gullick would recall that the landings on Morib Beach, Selangor were "the worst shambles I ever experienced during my time in the Army".

During the six months of British Military Administration (BMA) in Malaya, Lieutenant-Colonel Gullick was the second most senior civil affairs officer in the west-coast Malay state of Negri Sembilan. His experience of military government elsewhere gave him the edge over other members of the BMA. On the other hand, he was painfully aware of his ignorance of Malay language and custom (*adat*). Needs must however; especially when faced with post-war rural deprivation, Sino-Malay conflict and a pressing but convoluted problem of electing a new *Undang* (ruling chief) in the district of Jelebu. Twenty years later, writing in praise of the second edition of Gullick's *Indigenous Political Systems*, R.N. Jackson commented: "I surmise that Mr. Gullick in retrospect would wish that the book had been lying on his desk on the day many years ago when he first assumed duty as District Officer, Jelebu". Gullick had looked forward to resuming duty in Uganda, but, by the time civil government was restored to Malaya on 1 April 1946, his outstanding abilities as an administrator were widely recognised and he was transferred to the Malayan Civil Service (MCS). Moreover, any hopes he may have had of returning to district work faded when he was posted to Seremban as state

secretary of Negri Sembilan, and they vanished altogether two years later when, following the inauguration of the Federation of Malaya, he was appointed to the secretariat in Kuala Lumpur. It was here that he would spend the remaining eight years of his Malayan service.

Gullick realised sooner than many of his contemporaries that, whether they liked it or not, the future for the British in the MCS lay in the rapidly expanding central government. Although he would always insist, with characteristic modesty, that he was never more than a middle-ranking administrator, he played an important part in key initiatives of late colonial government. In the Defence and Internal Security Department he worked alongside O.W. Wolters (later Professor of SE Asian History at Cornell University) and received plaudits for his work as secretary to the Police Mission to Malaya (1949–50) which, in a move that would prove significant for winning hearts and minds during the Emergency, shifted the emphasis from paramilitary to ‘normal’ policing. As British power waned and administration became an Anglo–Malay diarchy, Gullick worked closely with the two principal Malay leaders. Dato Onn bin Jaafar (founder-president of the United Malays National Organisation and Member for Home Affairs) was Gullick’s boss at the Rural and Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) in the early 1950s. Tunku Abdul Rahman (Onn’s successor as UMNO leader and prime minister in waiting of independent Malaya) chaired the Malayanisation Committee of which Gullick was secretary in 1955–56. Gullick established excellent relations with each of these politicians, even though their temperaments and working practices differed markedly from his own.

In August 1956, with independence twelve months away, Gullick went on home leave. While he expected to return to Kuala Lumpur for at least another year in government service, he started to look for alternative employment. He was only forty and he and his wife, Pamela, whom he had met during the war and married in 1946 while in Seremban, had two children to bring up. Thus it was that during this period of leave he accepted an invitation from Sir John Hay to join the Guthrie group as company secretary. Hay had dominated the international rubber industry since the 1930s and, at 78, he still exercised total control over Guthries. Strong-willed and ruthless, Hay made the life of his company secretary pretty intolerable. Whenever he did anything of which Hay did not approve, Sir John would caustically remind the board: “Mr. Gullick is a civil servant”. At least some members, however, preferred Gullick’s approach and began to groom him as Hay’s successor. Hay scotched their scheme and Gullick resigned in 1962. He was followed by four of the six directors in 1963 when Hay himself was deposed. Years later Gullick would publish an account of his time as company secretary in *The Planter*. In the 1970s he was invited back onto the board and it is a mark of how highly he was regarded in Malaysia that he retained his position for a further two years after the ‘Dawn Raid’ in 1981 when Guthries was nationalised by Pemodalán Nasional Berhad. His place was probably secured by Tun Ismail Mohamed Ali (PNB’s chairman and former Governor of Bank Negara) who had worked closely with Gullick during the latter’s spell in the Federal Department of Economic Affairs in the 1950s.

After resigning as company secretary Gullick embarked on a career in law. Having qualified for the bar while on home leave in the early 1950s and entered Gray’s Inn, he transferred to be a solicitor. In 1963 he joined a small City firm, E.F. Turner & Sons, who, incidentally, had once been the London solicitors of Sultan Ibrahim of Johore (r.1895–1959) although

they had long since ceased to act for the Johore royal family. Gullick had risen to senior partner by 1974 when he left to spend the next twelve years working as a freelance lecturer in company law and practice to classes of students preparing for professional examinations. In 1987 he published what at the time became the standard text book on UK company law.

Meanwhile, he had become a scholar renowned for his socio-anthropological approach to the study of Malaysian history. Gullick's interest in social anthropology had first been fired during the colonial training course of 1938–39. British Military Administration in Malaya had provided material for an article on the election of the Undang of Jelebu, which appeared in 1946 in *MAN* (later the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*). Inspired by Professor Raymond Firth's *Malay Fishermen: Their Peasant Economy* (1946), he decided to pursue the subject in earnest. Consequently, when during his first home leave in 1948–49 he was detailed to attend a top-up course in colonial administration at the London School of Economics, he decided to enrol at the same time for LSE's diploma in Social Anthropology taught by Firth, assisted by Maurice Freedman. Thus began eight years of study which Gullick would interrupt on returning to Malaya and resume during home leaves in 1952–53 and 1956. The resultant thesis was published in 1958 as *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya*.

In *Indigenous Political Systems* Gullick described and analysed the political institutions of the Malay states of Perak, Selangor and Negri Sembilan on the eve of British intervention in 1874. He applied his experience as an administrator and the methods of the social-anthropologist to historical sources. It was, as Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf put it, “an essay in retrospective anthropology”. Despite its brevity (some 150 pages), its importance was immediately recognised. Edmund Leach, another LSE anthropologist, welcomed it as a refreshing contrast to the work of those grandees of Malay scholarship, R.J. Wilkinson and Sir Richard Winstedt, and foresaw its significance reaching far beyond specialist Malay studies. Despite carping over omissions and minor errors, even Winstedt acknowledged that it was “a most interesting and valuable work”. Published as a paperback in 1965, translated into Malay in 1970, revised and reissued in 1988, *Indigenous Political Systems* became the starting point for anyone working on nineteenth-century Malay political culture, and it is a tribute to Gullick's leadership in this field that those who followed in his footsteps went on to blaze new trails.

By the late 1990s Gullick had published over 14 books. Some, such as *Malaya* in Ernest Benn's 'Nations of the World' series which went through several editions, were aimed at a wide audience. Others, based on meticulous research, were major additions to scholarship. Two large works in particular stand out: *Malay Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Beginnings of Change* (1987, paperback 1989) and *Rulers and Residents: Influence and Power in the Malay States 1870–1920* (1992). Their common theme is the interaction of Malay communities and external influences in the early colonial period. They resemble *Indigenous Political Systems* in being anchored in contemporary records but they are less constrained by anthropological methodology. Until well into his 90s Gullick continued to publish pieces in scholarly journals and works of reference. His output included 16 lives for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, numerous articles in the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, important titles in the Branch's monograph and reprint

series, notably histories of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. He was also a contributor to this Journal.

Gullick had joined the Malayan (later Malaysian) Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1947. He was a member of its Council in the early 1950s and more recently of its International Advisory Board, and he was the Branch's representative in the United Kingdom. He was a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, a member of the Association of Sothe-East Asian Studies in the UK and, as a Senior Research Associate of SOAS, he was an active member of Ralph Smith's seminar on the Recent History of Southeast Asia during the 1980s and 1990s. Over the years he examined PhDs for the Centres of SE Asian Studies at SOAS, Hull and Kent, and lectured at universities in London, Malaysia and Australia. In the 1970s he served a five-year term as deputy chairman of the governors of the London School of Economics. His contribution to scholarship was celebrated in 1999, when the Malaysian Branch brought out a festschrift in his honour; in 2001 when he was the first recipient of the Royal Asiatic Society's Award; and in 2008 when the Sultan of Selangor presented him with the JSM (Johan Setia Mahkota) which carried the title of Datuk, the Malaysian equivalent of a knighthood.

Unfailingly courteous and completely lacking in self-aggrandisement, John Gullick was a dispassionate commentator on Malayan administration and his part in it. His contribution to the recollections of colonial officials gathered by Robert Heussler for his major study of the Malayan Civil Service is exceptional both for its accuracy and for its shrewd but balanced judgments. These qualities together with an open-handedness were also hallmarks of his scholarship. Generations of students and scholars have gratefully acknowledged the unstinting generosity with which he would reply comprehensively and by return to any inquiry that came his way. Blessed with a phenomenal memory, John Gullick never indulged in nostalgia. He adjusted easily to the post-colonial world and embraced the electronic era. While in the twilight of his life he went back to reading Herodotus in the original, he kept up with modern literature on a Kindle.

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