

Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles

(1781–1826)

For someone born on the lower rungs of an extremely class-ridden society (the son of a ship's cook, born on a ship off the coast of Jamaica), Stamford Raffles became a towering figure in many fields in his lifetime. As a scientist, explorer, diplomat, administrator, founder of Singapore, author and historian, the volume and range of his work is amazing, particularly when it is remembered that he died at the age only 43 years. But as a geoist (dying before Henry George was even born), he was a lofty thinker, humanitarian and able reformer.

Little is known of Raffles' parents. His father suddenly passed away when he was 14, leaving his family in debt. He immediately started working as a clerk in the British East India Company (the quasi-government trading company that shaped much of England's overseas conquests) and his keen mind soon attracted the attention of the governors, and so he was sent to a post in Penang, Malaysia, as assistant secretary.

Through his keen knowledge of the Malay language and their customs, he played a large part in planning the capture of Java from the Dutch. Raffles was immediately appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Java and its dependencies, the uncrowned king and overlord of some five million people. He soon reduced the power of native princes and reorganised the administration into a model of efficiency and honesty and became renowned for his outstanding liberal attitude toward peoples under colonial rule, for introducing partial self-government, for researching the magnificent Borobudur and other ancient monuments, and for his zeal in collecting a wide variety of valuable historical and scientific information.

Most importantly, thanks to the geoist principles that Raffles implemented, this small nation was elevated in a few short years to a degree of amazing liberty and prosperity without parallel. The key lay in Raffles having plunged into Javan history and discovering the reasons why a prosperous and glorious past on this great island had been effectively destroyed, not by the Dutch invasion itself, but by the folly of the Dutch rulers, who were ignorant or regardless of the just land laws of the Malays and Javanese. Under these traditional laws, landlordism had not existed and there had been no room for land speculation and land monopoly. Land was held for individual use, provided ground rent in full was paid over to the authorities.

Because of the Dutch tax mess, Raffles found the Javan finances in a shocking state – tolls, taxes and restrictions lay across every activity of Javanese life. Amongst the first acts of Raffles was the immediate abolition of nine-tenths these meddlesome and damaging laws.

Raffles proceeded by diplomacy to overcome the opposition and to secure the co-operation and friendship of the established chiefs and rulers. When these people

through his great Land Settlement Memorandum that he proposed to restore completely the ancient system of Java, they one by one accepted his authority without further question. He was approachable by high and low. Accompanied by his wife, he travelled over the island for the purpose of establishing his government and appointing suitable Javans to carry out the details of geoist reform and administration.

Raffles believed that the introduction of the land-rent system would provide a surplus which would entirely cover expenditure. The revenue did increase and more than covered the normal operations of Government, but it was not adequate to cover, in addition, two crippling burdens with which the administration was unfairly loaded - the payment of the cost of the wars of occupation and the "appalling handicap" of carrying out Lord Minto's promise to redeem the paper money still circulating from the Dutch period. Despite these burdens, Java's prosperity was improved immensely, even into the subsequent Dutch colonial period. Land speculation was small or non-existent and there was no chronic poverty here of the type which characterised India and other Asian countries.

Raffles was also a follower and associate of Wilberforce and was committed to the rigorous abolition of slavery. He started in 1812 by abolishing forced labour and feudal dues, then by imposing a tax on the keeping of slaves. In 1813 he issued an order forbidding any further importation of slaves, then passed a regulation prohibiting the slave trade through the Archipelago.

Due to post-Napoleonic deal-making, Java was handed back to the Netherlands in 1816, after which Raffles proceeded on a tour of Europe and then returned to Indonesia as Governor of Bencoolen, on the island of Sumatra. By the time Sumatra, too, was handed over to the Dutch, Raffles' geoist reforms had made Sumatra a prosperous country for the native inhabitants.

After lengthy searching for a new British base in the region, in 1818 Raffles founded Singapore. Raffles went on to establish Singapore on the same geoist land tax principles and as a free trade open port, and it is for this that he is best known in the English-speaking world. He was also responsible for the Raffles Plan of Singapore and, by the time he left for good in 1823, the city was on its way to become the largest port in the world.

Back in England, his outstanding achievements and abilities were recognised and a knighthood conferred upon him by the king. He also played the chief role in founding the Zoological Society of London and was its first president. But what are such honours but mere baubles compared to the little-known but truly inspired geoist reforms he implemented?

"I have the happiness to release several millions of my fellow creatures from a state of bondage and arbitrary oppression. The revenues of Government, instead of being wrung by the grasping hand of an unfeeling tax-farmer from the savings of industry, will now come into the treasuries of Government direct and in proportion to the actual capacity of the country."

