Tanah Rata and the Development of the Cameron Highlands, 1925–2030

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Abstract

The Cameron Highlands is named after William Cameron, a surveyor working for the British colonial administration who explored the region in the mid-1880s. In 1931 a township site was selected for Tanah Rata, with designated areas for public buildings, residential use, the armed forces, and recreation. Planning for the town was based in part on the garden city movement, whose supporters included Charles Compton Reade, the first town planner of the Federated Malay States. Economically, the town depends on income from agriculture and from tourism, both of which are expanding and creating environmental problems.

The Author

Dr Robert C. M. Weebers (1954–2017) was a Dutch art historian who earned a Masters degree from the University of Malaya in 2006 with a study of ‘Furniture of the Dutch Colonial Period in Melaka’, and a PhD based on a dissertation about the design of Melaka. At the time of his death, which was caused by an aggressive brain tumour, he was working on a second PhD dissertation at the University of Malaya on the history of Tanah Rata. He submitted this paper to JMBRAS for preliminary consideration shortly before leaving Malaysia to seek medical treatment in the Netherlands. The paper was reasonably complete, and the edited version published here pays tribute to his life and work.

Keywords

Hill stations, Mainland Southeast Asia, Peninsular Malaya, Cameron Highlands, Tanah Rata
Introduction

Planning for the Cameron Highlands and the town of Tanah Rata was part of a larger pattern of development of hill stations in Malaya and elsewhere in the British Empire. Freeman describes hill stations as places where Europeans escaped the high temperatures in lowland areas of the tropics for comfort and the restoration of health. In these locations, Europeans enjoyed hobbies, sports and social contacts surrounded by landscapes and architecture reminiscent of their homelands. Geographers have pointed out that climatic conditions in the tropics were poorly understood at the time of colonial conquests, and an unhealthy and unhygienic life style led to many diseases among Europeans. Around the start of the nineteenth century a notion took hold that cooler climates were healthier.

In this article I consider the intention and purpose of hill stations in British Malaya before independence, how the situation changed after independence, and the effects of those changes on the Cameron Highlands. In colonial Malaya, hill stations were places for relaxation, convalescence and cultivation of upland crops. The Cameron Highlands occupied a much larger area than Malaya’s other hill stations, and its agricultural potential was much greater. Apart from vegetables farms, commercial tea plantations were developed in the area (Cameron Bharat and the Sungai Palas Boh estates). After independence, visits by local residents and foreign tourists became economically important for the Cameron Highlands, although agriculture (vegetable farms, flower farms and tea plantations) remained important, and in time grew to an extent that they became a threat to the environment.

Published sources explain the history of hill stations in general and of the Cameron Highlands. Materials from the National Archives in Kuala Lumpur include annual reports, budget proposals, guidelines on developing the Cameron Highlands, memoranda, minutes of meetings, reports of visits by colonial officials, and plans covering 1960–2030 relating to the future development of Cameron Highlands.

Penang Hill, Maxwell Hill, Fraser’s Hill and the Cameron Highlands in British Malaya

The four hill stations in British Malaya were developed between 1788 and 1925. The oldest is Penang Hill (Bukit Bendera), situated at a height of 833 metres on the island of Penang. Captain Francis Light (1740–94), who established the British colony of Penang in 1786, is known to have gone up the hill on horseback in 1788, starting from the waterfall in what is now Penang’s Botanic Gardens. Small and developed in a simple way, Penang Hill was little more than open and wooded spaces, a network of winding roads, paths and a collection of bungalows, each set in its own compound. It was set up for health and relaxation. Its geography includes steep north, west and south slopes that form part of the rainforest cover.

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1 Aiken (2002: 78).
2 Freeman (1999: 21).
3 Crossette (1999: 171).
of the whole central range of hills. The east slope has farmland, houses and a funicular railway.

Maxwell Hill (now Bukit Larut), located about 10 kilometres from Taiping, was founded in 1884 by W. E. Maxwell. It is 1249 metres above sea level. The government built houses there, and missionaries were also in residence. The Tea Garden House, situated mid-way up the hill, was once the office of a tea plantation, but tea plants did not grow well there, and tea planting moved to the Cameron Highlands. Maxwell Hill was also known for the growth of all types of Malayan plants, including flowers and the rare giant fishtail palm.

Fraser’s Hill (Bukit Fraser), in the state of Pahang, was called ‘Little England’. The area includes seven hills at a height of 1200–1500 metres. The area was explored in the 1890s by L. J. Fraser, a somewhat shady fortune hunter, and was named after him. Fraser disappeared in the uplands some 25 years later and, in 1917, C. J. Ferguson-Davies, Bishop of Singapore, led a trek to search for him and, on his return, reported that the place was a good location for a hill station. In 1919 work started on an access road from the Gap, site of a rest house at the base of Fraser’s Hill, and the hill station at Fraser’s Hill opened to visitors in 1922. Excavation for a golf course reshaped the landscape, creating a long valley stretching away from what would become the centre of the town, consisting of a very small collection of structures—two hotels, a post office, and a few other government buildings.

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Fig. 1: Cameron’s Map of Pahang (Straits Sett. 21) 1889 Courtesy of the National Archives of Malaysia c.220/d.6.

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5 William Edward Maxwell (1846–97) was Assistant Resident in Perak and a member of the State Council from 1878 until 1881.
7 The Right Reverend Charles James Ferguson-Davies (1872–1963) was appointed as Anglican Bishop of Singapore in 1909.
The Cameron Highlands occupy a high plateau ringed by peaks on the Pahang-Perak border at a height of 1499 metres. By 1925 the government was persuaded of the need for a larger hill station in Malaya. In 1884 William Cameron (1833–86) had discovered a high tableland on the border between Perak and Pahang while travelling overland from Kinta to the mouth of the Pahang River. Cameron, who was knowledgeable about geology, mineralogy and metallurgy, astronomy and surveying, surveyed parts of Perak, Pahang and Selangor in 1885 at the request of the British government. He carried out two expeditions, the first starting in February 1885 and the second in 1886, in the territory between Selangor and Perak, but neither went near to what is now the Cameron Highlands. Although the Cameron Highlands bears his name, the area he visited was the valley of the Telom River, while the present-day Cameron Highlands is situated in the valley of the Bertam River.

In 1888 Sir Hugh Low9 suggested developing the upland region between Perak and Penang as a hill station. Low, like many other British administrators, was an enthusiastic advocate of plantation agriculture, believing that the combination of fertile tropical soils and European capital, drive and know-how would create a boom that benefited both the colony and foreign investors, and that the diversification of produce would provide a cushion against economic downturns.10

Surveys carried out in 1904 and 1905 examined the suitability of the area for a hill station11 but nothing was done until 1922, when G. W. Maxwell arranged for a group of specialists to undertake feasibility studies. This group included H. C. Robinson, J. B. Scrivenor, W. N. Sands and Dr H. P. Hacker. A Federal Council Paper (No. 6 of 1923), provided information on the geology of the area, agriculture and health12 and, following a visit by Maxwell in 1925 with a party of specialists, the government decided to develop the area as a hill station.13 A committee was appointed to decide on the development of Cameron Highlands, with a stipulation that part of the area was to be set aside for use by the Admiralty, the War Office and the Air Ministry.

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9 Straits Times weekly issue, 2 February 1925, p. 10; Federated Malay States Federal Council Paper No. 13 of 1925, p. 2, and appendix, p. 126. F. St. G. Caulfield (1928) stated that the river was correctly called the Bertang, not the Bertam.
10 Jamilah (2011: 249). Hugh Low (1824–1905) was a British colonial administrator and naturalist who served as Resident of Perak, 1877–89.
11 Barr (1977, 91–2).
12 Ibid. 7.
13 Herbert Christopher Robinson (1874–1929) was Director of the Federated Malay States Museums (1908–26); John Brooke Scrivenor (1876–1950) was a geologist working for the Federated Malay States; W. N. Sands (1873–1943) was an assistant economic botanist; and H. P. Hacker was senior malaria research officer at the Institute of Medical Research.
The Garden City Movement

At the end of the nineteenth century, in 1899, an organization was formed to promote a garden city movement based on comprehensive planning and social reform. The foundations of the welfare state were then being laid out by successive Liberal governments in the United Kingdom, and town and country planning took into consideration the progress seen in places where environmental standards had been raised. After the Second World War further changes were made as the Labour government pushed through social reforms.16

The founder of the garden city movement, Sir Ebenezer Howard,17 stated in his book *To-morrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (published in 1898, and re-issued in 1902 as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*) that the garden city movement envisaged planned, self-contained communities that could house 32,000 people on a site of around 2,400 hectares, planned on a concentric pattern with open spaces and public parks, with six radial boulevards 37 metres wide extending from the centre. The garden city would be self-sufficient and when it could not accommodate more people, another garden city would be developed nearby. Howard envisaged a cluster of several garden cities as satellites of a central city of 250,000 people, linked by road and rail. Garden cities would be surrounded by ‘greenbelts’ containing proportionate areas of residences, industry and agriculture.

While the three towns in Cameron Highlands (Brinchang, Ringlet and Tanah Rata) are not satellites of a central city, they exhibit elements of the garden city idea. The towns are self-contained communities linked by roads with green areas around them, residential zones and agriculture. The green areas include a golf course close to Brinchang and a botanical garden (Taman Sedia) near Tanah Rata.

The colonial administration created a town planning department in 1921. The first Government Town Planner for the Federated Malay States was a proponent of the garden city movement named Charles Compton Reade,18 who held the position until 1929. Reade drafted a town planning enactment (1923), organized a Town Planning and Housing Exhibition in Kuala Lumpur in 1926, prepared planning schemes for the local authorities, and left a department with a professional staff of seven. Reade introduced the garden city design principles in laying out government quarters and some towns in Malaya, but private landowners prioritized profits and had little interest in pleasant landscapes.19

Between 1925 and 1957 the development of Tanah Rata focused on resources for relaxation and health, following the development plans of two High Commissioners, Sir Cecil Clementi and Sir Shenton Thomas.20 Tanah Rata, the centre and main town of Cameron Highlands, is located at an altitude of 1,432

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16 Hardy (1991: 4, 9).
17 Sir Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928), the English founder of the garden city movement. His book *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898) describes a utopian city where people live together in harmony with nature.
18 Born in Invercargill, New Zealand. Charles Compton Reade (1880–1933) became a major figure in disseminating garden city ideas in Australia.
20 Sir Cecil Clementi (1875–1947) was Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the Federated Malay States, 1929–34; Sir Thomas Shenton Whitelegge Thomas (1879–1962) was his successor, serving from 1934 to 1942.
metres in the Bertam Valley between Gunung Beremban [Berumbun] and Rhododendron Hill, and extends from just above the beginning of the falls northwards for nearly a kilometre.\textsuperscript{21}

Tanah Rata was modelled in part on Baguio, in the mountains of northern Luzon, which has a cool climate and a topography similar to that of the Cameron Highlands.\textsuperscript{22} Baguio’s layout was designed by the American architect Daniel H. Burnham, who was commissioned by the American Governor, L. E. Wright, to develop a plan for a ‘health resort where American soldiers and civilian employees can find respite from the sweltering lowland heat’. The plan envisaged developing a compact garden city for 25,000-30,000 people. For Baguio, Burnham designed a geometric pattern amid rolling hills and winding roads, now known as Burnham Park, with the city built around this park.

In 1929, following an official visit to Baguio, Rende chaired a committee that prepared a preliminary general zoning plan for the highlands that reserved land for a green belt and open spaces, along with parks and recreation areas.\textsuperscript{23} The committee divided the area in two parts: the Southern Highlands (defined by a boundary south of the Berembun Jasar line via Rhododendron Hill and Dayang Endah) and the Cameron Highlands (north of the Berembun Jasar line). The southern section set aside an area around Ringlet for a market and vegetable gardens, and included a village with shops, a school and other facilities, and a water supply. The valley of the Sungai Bertam, including Lubok Tamang, was divided into areas for government and public purposes and residential use, farming and food production, and the area near Kuala Habu in the Bertam valley. Lubok Tamang was to have an agricultural school, and a belt of jungle was to be retained on the left bank of the Sungai Bertam. The Cameron Highlands was divided into a service zone (for the military), a village zone (shops, garages, yards, and cootie lines), an administrative zone (public offices, police, hospital, post office, bank and other sites), a residential zone and a recreation area (national parks, open spaces, hotels, club, nursery etc.). Land was reserved for a golf course south of Brinchang Camp, viewpoints were created at the summits of ‘Perdah’ and ‘Lindong’, while Bukit Mentigi (Rhododendron Hill) and Dayang Endah were reserved for public purposes.

In 1931, a re-zoning plan for the Northern Highlands (‘Cameron Highlands’ in the plan of 1929) included a site for the township of Tanah Rata (‘flat land’). The site was close to Robinson Falls, where there was adequate space for the disposal of sewage and the destruction of refuse without the risk of river pollution. The 1931 plan drew on examples not only of Baguio but also of Nuwara Eliya (Ceylon), Brastagi (Sumatra), and Fraser’s Hill. It called for diversion of the Bertam River, and construction of shop houses and a hospital close to the town. Other areas were set aside for the following:

\textsuperscript{21} Federated Council Paper No. 15 of 1925, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{22} The idea of modelling development of the highlands of Baguio was suggested in paragraph 38 of Federal Council Paper No. 13 of 1925. See also Memorandum on the Guiding Principles of Policy as recorded in Federal Council Paper No. 19 of 1929.
Agriculture (Area A)
- The armed services including volunteer forces (Area D)
- A park (Taman Sedia, Area E)
- Viewpoints (Bukit Mentigi, Terbakar, Jasur, Teng kolok and Perdah, Area F)
- General administration (Area G)
- A recreation area and a golf course (Area H)
- Schools and churches (Area I)
- A Brinchang Valley Reserve (Area J)
- Waterworks and catchment areas (Area K).

Fig. 3: The Cameron Highlands: Tanah Rata 1931.
Courtesy of the National Archives of Malaysia c.10/e.1

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Report of the Cameron Highlands Development Committee on the re-zoning of the Northern Highlands 1931, p. 11.
Clementi's ideas for Tanah Rata include canalization of the Bertam River in a straight line, with an avenue on each side lined with shade trees, and next to each avenue a road some 20 metres wide for cars, lined with shops, houses, a market, post office, police station, fire station, and public buildings. In addition there was to be a golf course and a park that would include Parit Falls. Shenton Thomas added a botanical garden near Tanah Rata and a path by the river to display the trees, shrubs, flowers growing in the Highlands. Thomas also called for a road, lawns, a playground for children, and a small museum displaying specimens of various timbers and plants.

Developing Cameron Highlands (1958–2030)

After Malaya became independent in 1957, the focus of activity shifted to tourism and agricultural expansion. Between 1960 and 2016 several plans were put forward for the development of Cameron Highlands. The area has three towns: Ringlet (a small cluster of houses and a hydroelectric plant), Tanah Rata (larger, with roads, several fine buildings, three good hotels and a golf course) and Brinchang (with tea plantations and vegetable gardens). To attract more tourists, planners suggested new hotels, nightlife featuring internationally known artists and troupes of performers, and guided tours, and called for the area to be developed as a convention city by adding shops (curio shops), new access roads with viewpoints, and possibly an airfield. The town was thought to have too many different buildings spread over too much space and was to be redesigned, and a lookout point would be created with a panoramic view of the surrounding area.

Tourism and recreation policies developed in tandem. Agriculture is the largest land use (5705 hectares) after forestry, and since the 1970s additional holiday homes and hotels have been built. About 80 per cent of the tourists visiting the area are Malaysians, whose number increased after the opening of a new road linking Simpang Pulai, Lejong and Gua Musang. Tourists from Asian countries, Japan, Europe, Australia, Korea, and Middle East account for most of the remaining 20 per cent.

The Cameron Highlands Development Plan for 2003–15 called for increases in agro-tourism, eco-tourism, and cultural and heritage tourism. Development activity in the Cameron Highlands increased after 2010, with new areas of forest set aside for vegetable and flower cultivation and for housing. However, land clearance failed to follow established practices for highlands and slopes, and the result was massive soil erosion, silt accumulation in lakes and rivers, landslides, and floods. In 2015 the state government and the Town and Country Planning Department highlighted illegal land clearing, and a draft local plan emphasized sustainability in highland tourism and agriculture management. Administrative units were created to support this agenda, including a Cameron Highlands Sustainable Development Board, a re-activated Pahang Highland Land

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25 Memorandum by the High Commissioner written at Tanah Rata on 5 July 1930.
26 Cameron Highlands 1) National Park 2) Botanical Garden; Minute by His Excellency the High Commissioner, Singapore 26 August 1935, p. 1.
Development Committee and a new Tragedy Risk Management Unit.

A local plan for the Cameron Highlands between 2016 and 2030 promotes 'the glory of Cameron Highlands as a prime highland tourist destination by emphasizing on rehabilitation, preservation and enhancement of the surroundings through good developmental practices'. However, the Regional Environmental Awareness Cameron Highlands (R.E.A.C.H.) contends that some of the projects in this plan will cause severe environmental damage, including loss of biodiversity, slope instability, shallower waterways in an already exhausted river system and will further compromise water catchment areas. The result will be more landslides and flash floods. In Tanah Rata and Brinchang, the two remaining towns with 'some green left', there are plans for mixed development projects. Large areas of the Mentigi Forest Reserve and Ulu Bertam Forest Reserve, including substantial parts of the famed mossy forests and jungle trails, will disappear. To deal with traffic congestion during the peak seasons, plans call for construction of one of the longest aerial trams in the world between Kuala Teria and Habu, a route that will cause damage to Gunung Brinchang. The alternative, a proposed road from Tringkap to Habu, would cross environmentally sensitive areas in the Mentigi Forest Reserve and damage the Habu water catchment areas and Robinson Falls. It would also cross the eastern flank of Gunung Berembun, where there are slopes of more than 35 degrees and elevations in excess of 1600 metres above sea level.²⁹

Developing more facilities for tourism and recreation will, in time, increase the environmental problems of Cameron Highlands. The number of visitors already exceeds the capacity of hotels and the growing number of holiday homes owned by companies and wealthy individuals, and apartments rented out to holiday-makers contribute to parking and traffic problems during weekends and holidays. Many of the development projects are designed to increase the amount of housing, but the amount of gently sloping land in Cameron Highlands is limited and most of it is already in use, so new development is taking place on steep slopes. Construction on steeply sloping land in an area with heavy rainfall, as is the case in the Cameron Highlands, causes soil erosion when the protective vegetation is removed, and the use of heavy machinery along with excessive cutting and filling of land creates additional problems.³⁰ Proposed highways linking the hill resorts of Genting Highlands, Fraser's Hill and Cameron Highlands would lead to the development of additional resorts and place further stress on the environment. The town of Tanah Rata has already experienced flash floods causing property losses and deposits of mud in the streets. An ecologically appropriate plan is needed that will balance tourism and recreation, scientific, education and conservation functions as well as cater for agricultural development.³¹

Conclusion

The area now known as Cameron Highlands was developed as a hill station because the government of the Federated Malay States was looking for an

³¹ Ibid.: 27, 28, 32.
additional and larger area to supplement existing hill stations. The new hill station was intended to provide British residents in Malaya with a health resort and a place for relaxation, but it differed from the other hill stations in Malaya in that it included a large area for agriculture. The climate of the Cameron Highlands was similar to that of Britain, and the layout included winding paths, a natural park and a golf course with characteristic British architecture. The town of Tanah Rata featured buildings in the English Tudor Revival and the black-and-white Tudor Revival style. The town's design was modelled on Baguio in the Philippines. The layout of both cities was influenced by the garden cities movement, advocated in Malaya by Charles Compton Reade.

During the colonial era the main source of income for the Cameron Highlands came from plantations, vegetable farms and a modest tourist industry. In recent years, development initiatives in the Cameron Highlands have not benefited the area. Reports and plans covering 1960–2016 reveal changes in the approach to the development of Cameron Highlands, and conflicting priorities. A report from 1960 says nothing about agriculture or agricultural tourism, but the Cameron Highlands Development Plan for 2003–15 called for increasing agro-tourism, eco-tourism and cultural and heritage tourism. In the Cameron Highlands District Local Draft Plan of 2015, the state government and the Town and Country Planning Department emphasize issues associated with illegal land clearing, and the local plan for Cameron Highlands 2016–30 calls for making Cameron Highlands a prime highland tourist destination by rehabilitating, preserving and enhancing the surroundings through well-considered developmental practices which will not harm the environment. However, many environmental problems have arisen because of the increase in agriculture and tourism. Due to land shortages and weak regulations, new hotels and new farms have been placed on the steep slopes, leading to erosion. The region needs a masterplan that will enable an expansion of agriculture, tourism and recreation while preserving important features of the Highlands and avoiding environmental catastrophe.

References


Howard, Ebenezer (1898), To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform, London: Swan Sonnenschein.


