In 1830, William Farquhar (1774–1839) wrote to The Asiatic Journal explaining why he was due “at least a large share” of the credit in forming Singapore. Yet, it is Stamford Raffles (1781–1826) alone who is hailed as the founder of Singapore. This notion, propounded by his biographers, has been reinforced by constant repetition, official acceptance and the omnipresence of Raffles’ name in Singapore.

In contrast, Farquhar’s pivotal role in the events leading up to the founding of the British settlement in Singapore in February 1819 and during its nascent years has been vastly underrated. To add insult to injury, Farquhar has been mocked, and his character and accomplishments belittled over the years.

To understand the origins of this aberration in Singapore’s history, we must turn to the biographies of Raffles. The first, The Life of Sir Stamford Raffles, written by Demetrius Boulger in 1897, during the heyday of the British Empire, would establish the trend of glorifying Raffles and disparaging Farquhar.

The First Biography on Raffles

Boulger portrayed Raffles as a hero who had risen from poverty, who was forced to leave school prematurely to support his mother and sisters, and who rose to fame solely by his own efforts. None of this is true.

Raffles’ father, Captain Benjamin Raffles, was a commander of vessels until the late 1790s, and lived until 1811. When Raffles left school around age 11 and to have obtained a highly sought-after position as an extra clerk at East India House. Raffles owed much to the financial support and patronage of his wealthy uncle, Charles Hamond, who secured Raffles’ entry into Mansion House Boarding School and paved the way for his employment at India House, while his later career and status were propelled by his patron, Lord Minto, the Governor-General of Bengal. However, Boulger’s “facts” have become part of the myth surrounding Raffles and helped create an enduring fascination with the man. Boulger was scathingly dismissive of any role for Farquhar, declaring that Raffles was “the real founder of Singapore as all the history textbooks say so”, and because he had a statue erected in his honour and an MRT station named after him whereas Farquhar had nothing.

Indeed, landmarks in Singapore such as Farquhar Street, Mount Farquhar and Farquhar’s Strait have all disappeared. Singapore’s first and only Commandant and Resident suffered the converse of memorialisation: the “phenomenon of forgetting”, a phrase coined by the 20th-century French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

Farquhar’s Accomplishments in Malacca

From as early as the 17th century, European trading companies competed for trade in the region. By the early 1800s, the British had secured trading posts at Penang and Bencoolen (Bengkulu) while the Dutch ruled Malacca, the Maluku islands and Java. The British, however, came to occupy Malacca serendipitously as a result of the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1788,
which stipulated that if a war should break out, either party could occupy the colonies of the other to protect them against enemy invasion. This occurred in 1793 when France, already at war with Britain, attacked the Dutch Republic. William V, the Dutch ruler, was overthrown and fled to England in 1795. There, he ordered Dutch officials to hand their bases over to the British for safekeeping and to stop them from falling into French hands. The understanding was that the British would return these Dutch territories when peace was eventually restored.

Into this fractious scene entered Farquhar and Raffles. Farquhar and Raffles were employees of the powerful East India Company (EIC), formed at the turn of the 17th century ostensibly to trade with India and Southeast Asia, but which eventually became a powerful agent of British imperialism.

Farquhar first arrived in Malacca as an officer of the EIC in 1795 when the British occupied the Dutch port. He was appointed Resident and Commandant in 1803, and in 1812, in recognition of his wide responsibilities, his title was changed to Commandant and Resident. It was in Malacca that Farquhar honed his skills as an administrator, the experience laying a strong foundation for his subsequent management of Singapore.

During Farquhar’s 15-year stint in Malacca, he was answerable to two lieutenant-governors and nine governors in Penang, all of whom were more than satisfied with his administration.

Farquhar dramatically turned Malacca’s economy around, implemented British laws declaring the slave trade a felony, and fought for the town’s survival. It is implausible that Farquhar would have changed from being a competent ruler in Malacca to an incompetent one in Singapore.

Following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the British were obliged to return Malacca to the Dutch. In Penang, whose trade had flourished during the British occupation of Malacca and Java, were worried that their inroads into new markets might be curtailed after the Dutch reclaimed their possessions. Along with Farquhar, the merchants pressed Colonel John Bannerman, the Governor of Penang, to protect British commercial interests in the Eastern Archipelago (present-day Indonesia).18

The Search for a New Site

Bannerman thus sent Farquhar to negotiate with rulers in the region, and in August 1818, he managed to secure a trade treaty with Sultan Abdul Rahamn of the Johor Empire. Although the treaty gave Britain most favoured nation status, Farquhar knew that something more substantial was needed to protect British interests once the Dutch returned.

In 1816, Farquhar had advocated founding a new base south of the Straits of Malacca and now he urgently pressed to secure the Carimun Islands (Pulau Karimun), situated some 20 miles southwest of Singapore and commanding the entrance to the strait.19

Bannerman was unconvincing, citing the costs involved, but he did forward Farquhar’s suggestions to the Marquess of Hastings, the EIC’s new Governor-General who administered British interests in the Far East. Hastings faced further pressure to act from the merchants in Calcutta and then from Raffles, who had arrived in the Indian city. Hastings decided to build upon the strong footing obtained by Farquhar’s commercial treaty and sent Raffles on a two-fold mission: first, to settle a dynastic dispute in Aceh, and then, to establish a new post at Rhio (Riau). Because of Farquhar’s experience and expertise, Hastings appointed him to take charge of any new post, but made him subordinate to Raffles, who was based in Bencoolen, Sumatra, at the time.20

Raffles and Farquhar met in Penang and on 19 January 1819, Raffles’ small fleet sailed for the Carimun Islands.21 As the islands proved unsuitable, Farquhar suggested Singapore as an alternative base.22 After Raffles and Farquhar stepped ashore on 28 January, Raffles, who had only recently contemplated Singapore as an option, realised that the island was an ideal spot to stake British claim.

But there was a problem. The island was part of the Johor Empire and its ruler, Sultan Abdul Rahamn, had sworn allegiance to the Dutch. Raffles got around this by exploiting a dynastic dispute: he made a deal with the sultan’s older brother and rightful heir, Tengku Long, offering him the throne in return for permission to establish a post in Singapore. Tengku Long agreed and Raffles installed him as Sultan Hussein Mohamed Shah of Johor.

Raffles then signed a treaty with Sultan Hussein and Temenggong Abdul Rahman, the local chief of Singapore, on 6 February 1819. This treaty allowed the EIC to lease land for a trading post. It was tiny—extending only from Tanjong Katong to Tanjong Malang, and inland for about one mile. The rest of the island belonged to Malay nobles and even within the British post, British regulations did not apply inside their compounds.

Raffles did not purchase the island of Singapore, nor acquire it for Britain as often claimed. Indeed, the acquisition was far from guaranteed. After appointing Farquhar Resident and Commandant as ordered by Hastings, Raffles gave Farquhar a list of instructions and departed for Penang on 7 February 1819.

The Dutch were furious at Raffles’ actions. So was the British government which was engaged in negotiations with the Dutch over their respective spheres of influence in the East. The Dutch protested, and reports were received that they would retaliate Singapore by force. Although Bannerman tried to persuade Farquhar to leave at once, he refused to abandon Singapore. Farquhar knew that Britain’s last chance to obtain a new base in the region.

In the meantime, Sultan Hussein and the Temenggong regretted having signed the treaty. They wrote to Sultan Abdul Rahamn and to his viceroy asking for forgiveness and accused Raffles of having coerced them into signing it. Farquhar persuaded the nobles to retract their statements, and due to his early actions, the post remained in British hands—at least for the time being. However, Baron Godert van der Capellen, the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, continued to insist that Sultan Hussein had no right to allow the British to establish a post, and demanded that the British withdraw from Singapore.

Farquhar’s Work in Singapore

While the politicians argued, Farquhar got down to work. Few of Raffles’ successors have been bold enough for building the settlement from scratch with precious little money, and limited time. But just as Farquhar achieved the near impossible he cleared over 650,000 square yards of jungle and swamp, built a reservoir and aqueduct, developed accommodation and facilities for the troops, and roads and small bridges. The population grew significantly as men from Malacca who knew and respected Farquhar flocked to Singapore to find work or to trade, bringing with them the money and muscle that were vital to the growth of the settlement.

The wealthy businessman Tan Che Sang, who had formed a close rapport with Farquhar in Malacca, followed him to Singapore, bringing capital for investment in the island as well as leadership expertise.Entrepreneurs such as Tan Tock Seng and Tan Kim Seng who similarly moved from Malacca were vital roles in cementing Singapore’s position as a commercial centre.

Raffles made a short visit to Singapore in late May 1819. Delighted at its metamorphosis, he commented on the numerous ships in the harbour and the large kampungs (villages). Proudly he claimed to the Duchess of Somerset: “[Singapore] is a child of my own, and I have made it what it is. You may easily conceive with what zeal I apply myself to the clearing of forests, cutting of roads, building of towns, framing of laws, &c &c.”23

But in fact, Raffles had not been in Singapore all this while: the improvements to the island’s economy and infrastructure were all due to Farquhar’s able leadership. Farquhar administered Singapore for nearly four and a half years between 7 February 1819 and 1 May 1823, while Raffles was present for barely eight months during those years from 31 May to 27 June 1819 and returning on 10 October 1822.

During Raffles’ absence, Farquhar turned the fledgling port into a success.
To combat the outbreak of disease, water was needed, as possible to fight such a threat. The Esplanade, Singapore” (c.1845), watercolour on paper, by Scotsman Charles Andrew Farquhar, was dedicated to Admiral Henry Keppel. Farquhar undertook the first survey of the island, later compiling a map that was forwarded to Raffles. He also drew up a scheme for the town, including a place for the declaration that “a certain number of houses may be licensed for the sale of malt or prepared opium.” Raffles not only restricted Farquhar to auction the licences and re-auction them “every three months until further orders,” but he also increased the 5 percent commission on each opium licence for himself.23 Raffles’ supporters have disavowed his role in this opium licensing scheme by accusing Farquhar of introducing these licences with willfully discarding Raffles’ orders. Ironically, the opium farms “introduced” by Farquhar and sanctioned by Raffles became Singapore’s largest single source of revenue from 1824 until 1827.24

### Farquhar’s impact

Farquhar was not only instrumental in establishing Singapore as a trading centre, but also in many other areas. He opened up trade with China, establishing Singapore as the new emporium of the East, outdoing even Batavia (Jakarta).25 He also highlighted Singapore’s gateway it offered to the Eastern Archipelago. He also pointed out that the settlement would be returned to England by mid-1824. Believing that Britain would retain Singapore, Raffles saw that his last chance to retire in glory was to reclaim Singapore as his own.26 Raffles had earlier set aside land at East Beach (Kampung Glam) for the European merchants, but they were most unhappy as the site was unsuitable for loading and unloading goods. Instead, the merchants wanted to build their godowns along the north bank of Singapore River – land that Raffles had reserved for the government. Aware that trade was vital for Singapore’s future, Farquhar had allowed the merchants to provisionally build warehouses there. As he later explained, had he not done so, Singapore would have “completely withered in the bud”.27

### Raffles’ actions

Farquhar complained to Hastings that his subordinates had deviated from instructions by allowing construction along the north bank, claiming that he would have to demolish these buildings and several others at great cost to the government.28 Realising that his original orders to build on East Beach were impractical,
Raffles then sought another location. He chose the swampy south bank of the river, where he had ordered the Chinese to establish a new settlement in 1819. Disregarding the distressed pleas of the scores of Chinese whom he had settled there, as well as the need for financial prudence, which he had so impressed upon Farquhar, Raffles ordered the swamp to be drained to form a new commercial precinct.41

The relationship between the two men grew more acrimonious. Raffles continued to undermine Farquhar’s reputation by sending letters to Hastings making accusations against Farquhar. He repeated Farquhar’s earlier assertions that Farquhar had overspent government funds, but later withdrew that criticism.42 Raffles later asked his doctor Dr Nathaniel Wallis to hint to Hastings that Farquhar had illegally acquired large areas of land, but later withdrew that allegation after admitting that he had been misled over the extent of Farquhar’s land acquisitions. Raffles went on to authorise him a grant of £200,000.43

Raffles further claimed that Farquhar had not provided a detailed account of the land granted and had allowed certain individuals when granting land. In contrast, Raffles selected the best allottees as family and friends and allowed his brother-in-law William Flint to build on reserved land.44 Although Farquhar sent detailed despatches and documents to Hastings that clearly refuted those charges, the seeds of doubt had been sown.45

Raffles went to find himself at the front of the field. He excluded Farquhar from his new Town Committee that he had set up in February 1823, stating that he did not consider Farquhar capable of running Singapore after his own resignation, when Singapore would fall directly under the Bengal government’s supervision. He hence warned that Raffles would quickly replace him by “a more competent local authority.” Indeed, the very next day Raffles wrote to his cousin, ecstatic about the progress Singapore had made under his administration.

“...the progress of my new settlement is in every way most satisfactory, and it would gladden your heart to witness the activity and cheerfulness that prevails throughout. Every day brings us new settlers, and Singapore has already become a great emporium. Houses and warehouses are springing up in every direction...”


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