ON 4 AUGUST 1811, a 10,000-strong British expeditionary force, composed mainly of Indian troops (sepoys) principally from Bengal, but with a handful of specialist troops (horse artillery and sappers) from the Madras (Chennai) Presidency army, invaded Java to curb the expansionist plans in the Indian Ocean of the Emperor Napoleon (reigned 1804-1814, 1815). Through his military appointees, Marshal Herman Willem Daendels and Lieutenant-General Jan Willem Janssens, who had served successively as governor-generals of Java between January 1808 and September 1811, Napoleon had instituted a Franco-Dutch Government in Java.

The British force landed at Cilincing just to the north-east of Jakarta (then Batavia) and swiftly captured the old town (Kota) of Batavia (8 August). Just over a fortnight later they stormed Daendels’ great redoubt at Meester Cornelis (Jatinegara) (26 August), a bloody victory which took a heavy toll on the defending Franco-Dutch who suffered more than fifty percent casualties (12,000+ out of their 21,500 troops enlisted were killed during the course of the six-week campaign), a death toll forever commemorated in the Jakarta place name – ‘the swamp of the corpses’ (Jatinegara). The British ruthlessly贯彻 from the Cornells battlefield.

The Governor-General of India, Lord Minto (in office, 1807-1811), who had accompanied the expedition from Kolkata in part to use his Masonic connections to ensure a swift political rapprochement with senior Dutch inhabitants, immediately issued a proclamation. This promised the inhabitants of Java a new era of enlightened government. Meanwhile, Minto’s protégé, Thomas Stamford Raffles, formerly Secretary (1807-1810) to the Pinang Government, was appointed (11 September) Lieutenant-Governor (in office, 1811-1816), marking the beginning of what is commonly referred to as the British Interregnum (i.e., interim administration) in Java.

It might have been expected that the 200th anniversary of the victory of the British-Indian force at Meester Cornelis and the establishment of Raffles’ five-year interim administration, would have been the occasion for a number of ceremonies and historical memorial events, providing an opportunity for the staging of exhibitions and conferences focussing on the British period in Java. The humanitarian reforms of Minto and Raffles, in particular Minto’s abolition of slavery and judicial torture under the terms of the 1807 abolitionist legislation, might have been celebrated in such a bicentennial, and this in turn might have helped to strengthen Anglo-Indian relations and quench an interest in Indonesian history and culture. Sadly, none of these expectations have come to pass. There is seemingly no interest in the history of the short-lived British Interregnum in Java other than the part of the British or the Indonesians. This strange indeed given that Indonesia’s daily experience the long-term effects of the British occupation by driving on the left and buying snacks from ‘pedagang kaki lima’ (‘five-foot’ food peddlers – the number referring to Raffles’ instruction that all pavements should be five-foot broad). This year, on 19 August 2016, the 200th anniversary of the formal return of Java and its dependencies to the Dutch, the bicentennial will have passed.

India’s contribution during this period was crucial for without the presence of the Bengal and Madras troops, who constituted two thirds of Minto’s force, the British could never have undertaken such a bold military operation. Furthermore, it took place under the aegis of the British East India Company and was coordinated by the Company from its seat of governance in India in Calcutta (Kolkata), hence Minto’s presence in the expeditionary force. Many of the Bengal and Madras troops remained in Java throughout the period of Raffles’ government and some even beyond that: the Indonesian national hero, Prince Diponegoro’s (1785-1855), personal physician was an erstwhile Bengal Muslim sepoy, and former Bengal Presidency Army troops fought on both the Dutch and javanese sides during the Java War (1825-1830). The fact that the entire island of Java had been pawned by the returned Dutch colonial government in 1824 for a 300 million Sicca Rupee loan (£2,000,000,000 in today’s money) on a private Kolkata bank, Palmer & Company, made the bank’s owners particularly anxious not to lose their investment – hence the offer of Bengal sepoys to the beleaguered Dutch.
Proposed restitution of the 'Kolkata Stone'
The Javanese king Airlangga (reigned, circa 1019-1049), is a well-known and much loved figure in Indonesia. He has even been compared to the Pandawa hero Arjuna in the Mahabharata. The very prototype of javanese classical poetry. By attaching to his lord and sovereign the timeless qualities of the sage-hero, the poet ensured that Airlangga’s reign would serve as an outstanding example for his royal descendants.

In 1811, Englishman Stamford Raffles discovered a stone inscription in the region of present-day Surakarta, and is popularly known as the 'Minto Stone'.


Below: The ‘Minto Stone’ in the grounds of the tied cottage on the current Lord Minto’s estate. Photograph courtesy of Nigel Bullough (Hadi Sidomulyo) 2006.

The 10th-century stone of Sangguran, issued to commemorate the re-unification of the Majapahit kingdom, has for some years been aware that the gift from Mackenzie might “at some day tell eastern history.” At the very least, it shows that Minto valued the item and took the trouble to have it transported to his estate in Scotland, despite the fact that it weighed more than those tons. The ‘Kolkata Stone’, on the other hand, was stored in the Indian Museum where it is now almost forgotten. If the former Governor-General had expressed his hope that the gift from Mackenzie might “at some day tell eastern tales of us,” the only tale that the ‘Kolkata Stone’ can tell is one of apathy and neglect.

In reality, of course, the present position of both stones is inappropriate. One – the Minto Stone – has been reduced to the status of a garden ornament in a remote and barely accessible border region of Scotland, while the other has suffered a degraded existence as a minor curiosity trapped in the godowns of a foreign museum as though by historical accident. The clarity of its inscription has also been severely degraded by the current deplorable conditions in which it is kept as we can see from the recent photograph taken by the Leiden-trained Sanskritist, Professor Arlo Griffiths, currently of the École française d’Extrême Orient.

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Special thanks to Professor Arlo Griffiths (EFEO) for the images of the Airlangga Stone in Kolkata. Special thanks to Professor Arlo Griffiths (EFEO) for the images of the Airlangga Stone in Kolkata.