

**MALAY SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS UNDER  
BRITISH COLONIAL RULE BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR, 1876-1941**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article attempts to re-examine whether school libraries in the Straits Settlements were a post war innovation by going through primary and secondary historical records available. It was discovered that although the first policy to initiate school libraries in Malay schools was stated in 1899, it was unlikely to have taken off since the only press to publish Malay school books was discontinued the same year. It was not until 1925 that the Malay Translation Bureau was reorganized to produce Malay school books and reading books. However, not much books were translated and finalized as there was no more than nine staff employed in the Bureau when compared to 250 staff in Balai Pustaka in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). By 1936, 165 out of 171 Malay boys' schools had school libraries. However, the libraries were limited to having 30 titles each. In contrast school libraries in the NEI had 328 titles. Therefore not much efforts were put in to make the Malay Translation Bureau into a full-fledged publishing house, like Balai Pustaka, to meet a growing demand for Malay books as Malay schools and school libraries expanded throughout the Straits Settlements during the first 40 years of the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** School libraries; Malay schools; Malay book publishing; Education in the Straits Settlements

**INTRODUCTION**

In 1970 Edward Lim Huck Tee wrote *Libraries in West Malaysia and Singapore* giving a definitive historical overview in the beginning and growth of libraries in the two countries. Except for the Raffles library in Singapore which began as a school library, Lim was of the view that school libraries in Malaysia and Singapore were largely a post-war innovation. This article attempts to re-examine the views of Lim (1970) by locating primary and secondary records in search of the existence of Malay school libraries in the Straits Settlements before the Second World War.

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Prior to the close of the eighteenth century, Britain had no settlements along the Straits of Malacca beyond petty factories at Aceh and Kedah (Newbold 1839, 4). In 1786 the East India Company (EIC) took possession of Penang. From 1786 to 1805 the island was a dependency of Bengal and in 1805, Penang was created the fourth Indian Presidency, with a large staff of officials (Mills 1925).

In 1793 France declared war on Great Britain and the Dutch Republic, and in January 1795 when the French overran Holland and forced the Dutch to make a separate peace, the stadholder fled to England, where he authorized the British government to take over temporary control of Malacca in the East to it out of French hands. In 1795, British occupied Malacca which had a population of less than 20,000; her trade and agriculture were at a low ebb, while the writ of government extended no more than a mile or two from the town centre (Turnbull, 1983, 242-243). On 21 September, 1818, British, by the Treaty of Vienna returned Malacca to Dutch's control (Newbold 1839)

After Raffles founded Singapore, he appointed Farquhar as the First British Resident (1819-1823) and supervised Farquhar's administration fitfully from his post of Bencoolen in West Sumatra (Chew 1991). In June 1823, Raffles left Singapore for the last time and made it a dependency of the Supreme Government of Calcutta (Tan 1999)

By the treaty between Britain and Holland, dated 17 March 1824, all English settlements on Sumatra were ceded to Holland from 1 March, 1825, in lieu of the Dutch settlements on the continent of India, and the city of Malacca on the Malay Peninsula. The King of Holland, on his part, agreed to withdraw objections, which had been made, to the occupation of the island of Singapore by the EIC; and never to form any establishment on any part of the Malay Peninsula, or to conclude any treaty with any prince, chief or state therein (Newbold 1839, 15-16). On 24 June 1824, Singapore and Malacca were effectively transferred to the EIC by the British Parliament and both territories became subordinate to Fort William in India (Tan 1999).

#### **Formation of the Straits Settlements in 1826**

In 1826, the three Settlements of Penang, Singapore and Malacca were incorporated, forming a fourth Presidency of India (Nunn 1921). In 1830, the Presidency was abolished and the three Settlements, known as the Straits Settlements, were placed under the Government of Bengal. In 1832, Singapore became the headquarters of the Government (Braddell 1921). Mills stressed that the EIC's interest and policy in the

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Malay Peninsula were purely commercial and settlements like Penang, Malacca and Singapore were regarded not as nucleus of a Malayan Empire but trading centres (Mills 1925, 171).

Officers of the Indian Civil Service, the elite corps of Britain's overseas cadres, were never interested in the straits, and, from 1830 to the end of company rule in 1867, recruits came mainly from the Indian Army, with occasional entrants being nominated by company directors from business firms or from the clerical ranks in India. Generally speaking, the straits service in this period stood at the bottom of the imperial ladder, reflecting the stepchild status of the settlements it worked in. For Governors, too, the straits were seen as the end of the line, a place with no future. That reputation was to haunt the colony for the rest of the century (Heussler 1981, 25).

#### **THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS UNDER THE COLONIAL OFFICE IN LONDON, 1867-1895**

On 1<sup>st</sup> April 1867 the Straits Settlements were transferred from the control of the Indian Government to that of the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London (Jarman 1998). In 1870, the first Governor of the newly established Colony, Sir Harry Ord, appointed a Select Committee, under the Chairmanship of Colonel R. Woolley, "to enquire into the State of Education in the Colony". The Committee recommended to put into effect the following:

- i) To appoint the Inspector of Schools, Straits Settlements.
- ii) To reform the existing Grants-in-aid system, which was mainly applied to English missionary or privately run schools.
- iii) To greatly extend and improve vernacular education, especially Malay vernacular education (Wong and Gwee 1980, 11).

The first Inspector of Schools, A. M. Skinner, was appointed in 1872 and he considerably extended secular government Malay boys' schools in the Straits Settlements, the scale of which is indicated by the growth of Malay schools for the years 1872, 1882, (Chelliah 1947) and 1900 (Elcum 1901) as shown in Table 1. The first Malay vernacular girls' school in Singapore and the Straits Settlements was established in 1884 at Telok Blangah (Hill 1885).

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Table 1: Growth of Malay Government Schools in the Straits Settlements, 1872, 1882 and 1900

Year	Number of Malay Schools	Enrolment
1872 <sup>1</sup>	16	596
1882 <sup>1</sup>	85	2,200
1900 <sup>2</sup>	169 (141 boys' schools and 28 girls' schools)	7,344

Sources: <sup>1</sup>Chelliah (1947, 58); <sup>2</sup>Elcum (1901, 165).

From the years 1891 to 1901, the average enrolment of Malay boys aged 15 and below enrolling in Malay boys' schools increased from 16 per cent to 19 per cent as presented in Table 2. However, the average enrolment of Malay girls aged 15 and below enrolling in Malay girls' schools did not reach more than 2 per cent as shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Percentage of Malaysian Boys 15 years and below in Malay Boys' Schools in 1891 and 1901

Straits Settlements	Total Malay boys' schools	Total enrolment	Malay boys in age 15 years and below	Percentage
1891				
Singapore	21	834	4,672	18%
Penang	65	3,006	21,705	14%
Malacca	61	2,965	15,239	19%
Total	147	6,805	41,616	16%
1901				
Singapore	16	1,073	5,182	21%
Penang	65	4,103	31,851	13%
Malacca	64	4,861	16,804	29%
Total	145	10,037	53,837	19%

Sources: Hill (1892, 284-287); Merewether (1892, 43); Innes (1901, 19); Elcum (1968, 218-222).

Malay vernacular education was free. English education as a rule was paid for. The Government English schools and all the Malay vernacular schools were directly controlled by the Education Department. Malay elementary education in a four-year course was provided, teaching children to read and write Malay fluently, both in the Malay modification of the Arabic character and in Romanised character (Elcum 1968,

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140-144). British's support for Malay vernacular was clearly stated in 1899 in the following remarks by Sir Frank Swettenham, who was appointed the first Resident General of the Federated Malay States on 1 July 1896 and later, the first Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the Malay States (1901-1904) in 1899 (Editor 1946):

“In the Malay sketches contained in this and a previous volume, I have endeavoured to portray,...the Malay as he is in own country, against his own picturesque and fascinating background...The position he occupies in the body politic is that of the heir to the inheritance. The land is Malaya, and he is the Malay. Let the infidel Chinese and evil-smelling Hindu from Southern India toil, but of their work let some profit come to him (Swettenham 1900, 37).”

Table 3: Percentage of Malay girls age 15 years and below in Malay girls' schools in 1891 and 1901

Straits Settlements	Total Malay girls' schools	Total enrolment	Malay girls age 15 years and below	Percentage
1891				
Singapore	4	95	4,871	2%
Penang	4	301	20,966	1%
Malacca	6	185	16,804	1%
1901				
Singapore	4	92	5,447	2%
Penang	13	418	32,390	1%
Malacca	12	282	16,541	2%

Sources: Hill (1892, 284-287); Elcum (1968, 218-222); Merewether (1892, 43); Innes (1901,19).

**THE FIRST POLICY TO INITIATE MALAY SCHOOL LIBRARIES**

Richard James Wilkinson (1867-1941) was appointed to an Eastern Cadetship in Ceylon, Hong Kong, the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States (from 1896). He arrived in Singapore in 1889 and went from a district office in Province Wellesley to audit work, to take charge of the local office in Penang, and then to perform the duties of sheriff (court officer) before he became a magistrate. In the course of his peripatetic experience, he passed the government examination in Malay in 1891 (Gullick 2001, 23).

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In 1895, Wilkinson was sent to act as Superintendent of Education in Penang; as a result he also deputized for the Inspector of Schools (head of department) in Singapore (Gullick 2001, 25). The first known policy to initiate school libraries for Malay vernacular schools occurred in 1899 when the Acting Inspector of Schools for the Straits Settlements, R. J. Wilkinson, reported that it would be possible to supply every school with a small library without increasing the departmental votes. According to Wilkinson, the school library “in the hands of an intelligent teacher, would tend to foster a spirit of reading and to greatly to the popularity of education.” However, this policy could not be implemented until many years later when the Government Malay Press was discontinued in the same year for it was “found to be working at a cost exceeding the market value of the work done” (Wilkinson 1900, 136).

Coincidentally, the Methodist Publishing House (MPH) was established in 1890 by William Shellabear (1862-1948) and for 12 years he was its chief printer, author, editor and manager (Hunt, 1996). Wilkinson who had created a *Malay Literature Series (MLS)* for the Government Malay Schools promised the MPH as much work in romanised Malay as it could handle (Hunt 1996, 150). From 1906 to 1920 MPH published 16 titles of the *MLS* (Proudfoot 1993).

#### **THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS AS PART OF BRITISH MALAYA, 1895-1942**

In 1896 the Federated Malay States (FMS) comprising the states of Selangor, Perak, Negri Sembilan and Pahang came under British indirect rule through a series of treaties and permissive letters (Khoo 2001). Johore and the four northern states – Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu’s suzerainty were transferred to Britain by Siam (now Thailand) in 1909. British Malaya thus consisted of three parts, the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States (Carrington 1956).

In 1897, the post of Federal Inspector of Schools was created for the Federated Malay States. In 1906, this Federal Inspectorship was abolished and control of education in the Colony and the Federated Malay States was vested in under the Director of Education. Accordingly in 1916 a new post of Assistant Director in charge of Malay vernacular education in the Colony and the Federated Malay States was created. In 1919, the new post of Chief Inspector of Malay Schools was inserted and in 1924, another Assistant Director of Chinese vernacular schools was appointed (Winstedt 1923, 4-6). In 1930 an education officer was put in charge of Tamil schools (Cheeseman 1955). Figure 1 presents the organizational chart of the Department of Education, 1906-1942.

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It was not until the educational conference in 1925 “that some talk took place on the subject of school and village libraries”. It was suggested that if schools were supplied with books to be returned to headquarters within a definite period, it was more likely that these books would be read by both teachers and other inhabitants of the *kampongs* (villages) that if each school were supplied with a small library of its own. O.T.Dussek gave a rough “estimate of something over 20” books would suffice. The meeting agreed that it would be better to have a small library in each school and suggested that Dussek “immediately proceed to obtain books to be sent to Inspectors of Schools for distribution for this purpose” (Winstedt and Watson 1925, 12). In 1925, the books Dussek gathered were 12 titles of the *MLS* (1906-1920), and possibly textbooks published before 1925 which may not be much considering the closure of the Government Malay Press in 1899 (Wilkinson 1900, 136), the only known press to print Malay school books since 1885 (Proudfoot 1993, 592-593). By 1931, 55 per cent of Malay boys, or one out of every two boys aged 5 to 14 years went to Malay boys’ schools (Table 4). On the average no more than 7 per cent of Malay girls went to Malay girls’ schools (Table 5).

Table 4: Percentage of Malaysian male population 5-14 years old in Malay schools in 1931

	Total Malay boys’ schools	Total enrolment	Malay boys in the age Group of 5-14	Percentage
Straits Settlements				
Singapore	19	2,583	7,352	35%
Penang	76	8,835	15,290	58%
Malacca	79	8,846	12,254	72%
Average percentage				55%

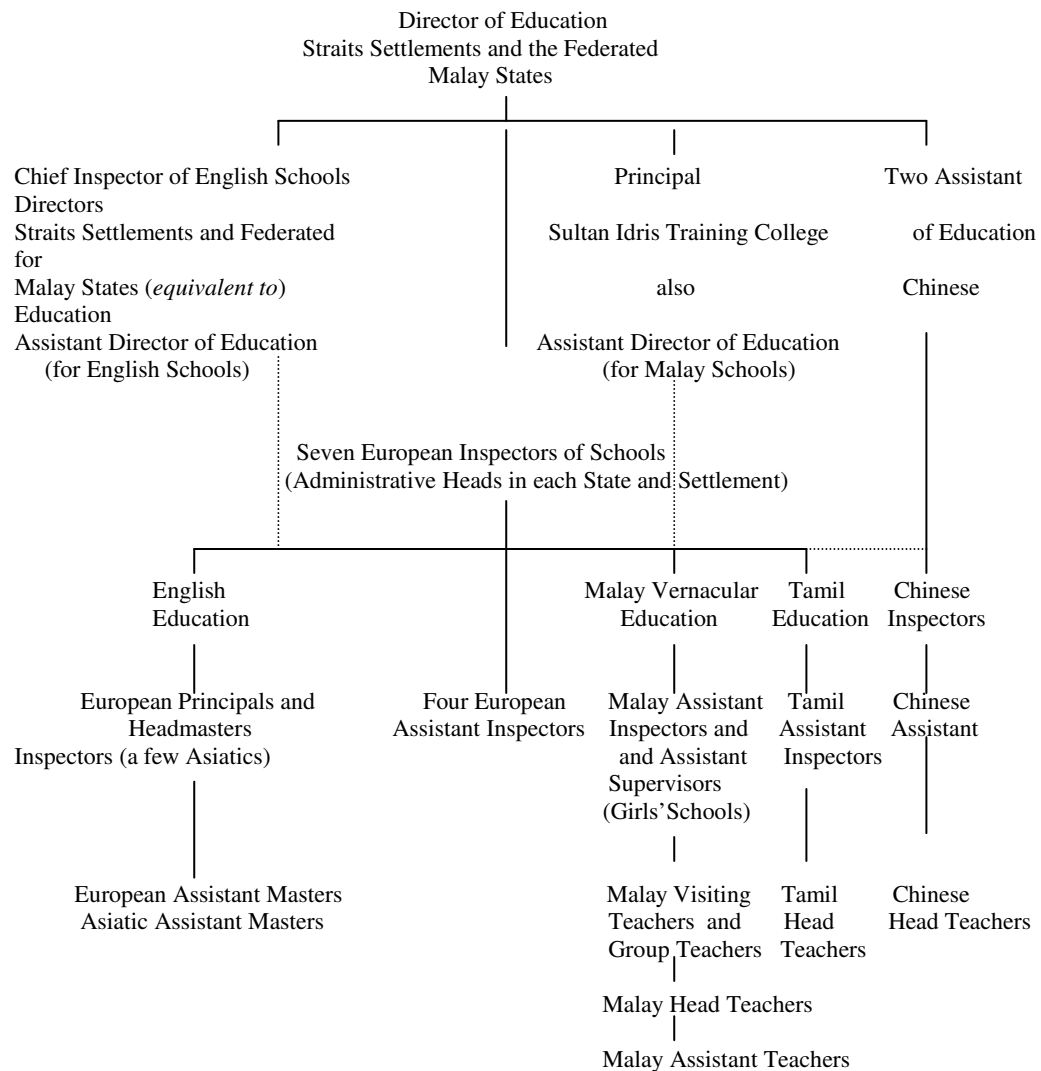
Sources: Morten (1932, 61); Vlieland (1932, 238-239).

Table 5: Percentage of Malaysian female population 5-14 years old in Malay schools in 1931

	Total Malay girls’ schools	Total enrolment	Malay girls in the age Group of 5-14	Percentage
Straits Settlements				
Singapore	6	404	7,406	5.5%
Penang	26	1,847	14,912	12.4%
Malacca	8	326	13,036	2.5%
Average percentage				6.8%

Sources: Morten (1932, 61); Vlieland (1932, 238-239).

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Source: Neilson (1934, 833).

Figure 1: The direct sphere of control of the Education Department in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, 1906-1942



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It was not until 1925 that the Translation Bureau was set up at the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC, now known as Sultan Idris University of Education) into five sections to do translation work and produce school books:

- (i) Preparation of new books.
- (ii) Revision of books.
- (iii) Reprints which need no revision.
- (iv) Translation.
- (v) Training of translators (Shelley 1926, 221).

In 1931, O. T. Dussek visited the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) and upon his return, he wanted to develop the Malay Translation Bureau along the same lines as Balai Pustaka. However, his request was not granted (Abdullah Sanusi 1966). According to available annual reports on education from 1925 to 1938, the maximum staff was nine in 1930 (Winstedt 1931, 762). In the NEI, Balai Pustaka (Bureau of Popular Literature) was set up in 1908 and by 1927, it became a full-fledged organization with an editorial department, translation department, a library and a fully equipped printing plant run by a total of 250 staff (Teeuw 1972, 111-112).

Therefore from the years 1924 to the end of 1941, 48 titles of the *Malay School Series (MSS)* were published in romanised Malay. Up to the end of 1941, 40 titles of the *Malay Home Library Series (MHLS)* were published in Arabic script (*jawi*) (Lie 1968). Balai Pustaka began to publish Malay books in 1919, and from 1926 to 1938, 232 new Malay books and 147 reprints were published by this bureau (Zubiadah 1972). Although it was reported that 165 out of 171 Malay boys' schools in the Straits Settlements had school libraries as presented in Table 6, each library was limited to having 30 titles, comprising 19 titles from the *MSS* and 11 titles from the *MHLS* as recommended in the Education Code 1936 (Tables 7 and 8). On the other hand, school libraries in the NEI had 328 titles published in the Malay language (Table 9). There were no records of school libraries in Malay girls' school.

In 1938 it was reported that the number of textbooks was "increasingly yearly but with the present resources of the Bureau it will take a long time for the urgent needs of the schools to be adequately supplied" (Linehan 1939, 26). To make up for this deficiency, the Malays bought modern reading materials heavily from the NEI, with the result that British Malaya was flooded with outside papers, frequently unsuitable in style and could not be adapted to the needs of the local communities (Yazid 1931, 13).

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Table 6: Malay schools and school libraries in the Straits Settlements, 1935 and 1937

	Number of schools		Average enrolment	
	1935	1937	1935	1937
Boys				
Singapore*	19	20	2,831	3,392
Penang	68	68	9,198	9,233
Malacca	81	80	8,992	9,144
Labuan	2	3	149	212
Total	170	171	21,170	21,981
Number of school libraries	165 (97%)	165 (96%)		
Girls				
Singapore	6	6	528	601
Penang	26	29	1,755	2,039
Malacca	9	12	405	506
Labuan	1	1	20	23
Total	42	48	2,708	3,169
Grand total	212	219	23,878	25,150

Note: \*Include an aided school at Pulau Bukom, Singapore.

Sources: Morten (1936, 32 & 110); Keir (1938, 29 & 104).

Table 7: Recommended Malay books for Malay school libraries as published in the Education Code of 1936

Subject	Title	Printer/Publisher
History	<i>Sejarah Alam Melayu, Parts I - IV</i>	Printers Limited
Composition and grammar	<i>Ilmu Bahasa Melayu, Parts I &amp; II</i>	Printers Limited
Physical training	<i>Kitab Latehan Tuboh, Parts I &amp; II</i>	Printers Limited
Elementary	<i>Kitab Ilmu Geometry</i>	Macmillan & Co.
Geography	<i>Ilmu Alam Asia</i>	Macmillan & Co.
	<i>Ilmu Alam Jajahan British</i>	Macmillan & Co.
	<i>Ilmu Alam Eropah</i>	Macmillan & Co.
	<i>Ilmu Alam America</i>	Macmillan & Co.
	<i>Ilmu Alam Africa</i>	Macmillan & Co.
Hygiene	<i>Kitab Kesihatan, Parts I &amp; II</i>	Macmillan & Co.
	<i>Ilmu Bumi</i>	MPH
Scouting	<i>Ilmu Pengakap</i>	MPH
Others	<i>Kitab Kumpulan Nama</i>	Printers Limited

Source: Education Department (1936, 16-17); Abdullah Sanusi (1966, 7-42).

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**Table 8 : Recommended Malay books for Malay School Libraries as published in the Education Code of 1936**

Title <sup>1</sup>	Printer <sup>2</sup>	Remarks <sup>2</sup> (Retail Price) Malay Home Library Series <sup>2</sup>
<i>Sang Maharaja Singa</i>	1 (NA)	Translated from "Man-eaters of Tsavo" (NA).
<i>Hikayat Taman 'Ajaib</i>	2 (NA)	Children's stories (NA).
<i>Cherita-cherita Duka Shakespeare</i>	3 (Printers Ltd)	Four stories from "Lamb's Tales" (30 cents).
<i>Pelayaran Gulliver</i>	4 (Printers Ltd)	Translation from "Gullivers Travels" (12 cents).
<i>Sang Lomeri</i>	5 (Printers Ltd)	Translation from "Reynard the Fox" (\$1.20 cents).
<i>Cherita-cherita Sherlock Holmes</i>	6 (Printers Ltd)	Translation from the "Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" (75 cents).
<i>Pulau Mas</i>	7 (Printers Ltd)	Translation from "Treasure Island".
<i>Cherita-cherita Suka Shakespeare</i>	8 (Printers Ltd)	Four stories from "Lamb's Tales" (\$1.00).
<i>Pertama Kali</i>	9 (Printers Ltd)	Detective stories (20 cents)
<i>Cherita Chendera Lela</i>	10 (NA)	Cinderella (Picture book) (NA)
<i>Cherita Aladdin</i>	11 (NA)	Translation from "Aladin and the wonderful lamp" (Picture book) (NA)

Notes: NA means Not Available. The Malay Home Library Series are published in *jawi* script.

Source: <sup>1</sup>Education Department (1936, 17); <sup>2</sup>Abdullah Sanusi (1966, 48-49)

**Table 9: Comparing the quantity of Malay books in vernacular school libraries in British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies**

British Malaya <sup>1</sup>	Netherlands East Indies <sup>2</sup>			
	Javanese <i>Volksbibliotheek</i> (School libraries)	Sudanese <i>Volksbibliotheek</i> (School libraries)	Madurese <i>Volksbibliotheek</i> (School libraries)	Malay (Melayu) <i>Volksbibliotheek</i> (School libraries)
19 titles for Reference Library	417 titles in Javanese	291 titles in Sundanese	67 titles in Madurese	Not Applicable
11 titles for Lending Library	282 titles in Malay	282 titles in Malay	282 titles in Malay	328 titles in Malay
30 titles (total)	697 titles (total)	573 titles (total)	349 titles (total)	328 titles (total)

Sources: <sup>1</sup>Education Department (1936, 16-17); <sup>2</sup>Sulistyo-Basuki (1998, 60-61).

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## **CONCLUSION**

The formalization and expansion of government Malay schools began in 1872 with the appointment of the first Inspector of Schools and the setting up of the Education Department. It was not until 1884 that the first Malay girls' school was set up at Telok Blangah in Singapore. By 1931 one out of every two Malay boy aged 5 to 14 in the Straits Settlements were enrolled in Malay boys' schools. On the average, no more than seven per cent of Malay girls aged 5 to 14 were enrolled in Malay girls' schools.

Although the first policy to initiate school libraries in Malay schools began in 1899, little would have been done considering the Malay Government Press, the only press to print and publish Malay school books was discontinued in the same year. In 1894, it was reported that schools in Singapore and Malacca were providing instruction in Romanised Malay. Subsequently, the Education Department appointed MPH to publish 16 titles of the MLS from 1906 to 1920. It was not until 1925 that the Malay Translation Bureau were set up to translate, edit and produce school books and reading books for mass vernacular schools without a full compliment of editorial and translation staff as evident in Balai Pustaka. In 1935, the Bureau's one Senior Translator, five Grade II Translators and two Malay writers had to translate and type 497 pages of legal enactments and speeches and "continued to be engaged in the preparation of text-books for Malay schools (Morten 1936, 61).

Contrary to Lim's observation that school libraries were a post war innovation (1970, 136), there were school libraries in English and Chinese schools. There were school libraries in Malay schools since the first policy to initiate these libraries in 1899. However, the Education Department did not set up a full-fledged Malay book production agency like Balai Pustaka, to ensure that sufficient Malay school books and reading materials were produced to meet the growing expansion and demand of Malay schools and school libraries in the Straits Settlements. Lim (1970) would have been right if he was only referring to school libraries in Malay girls' schools since there were no known libraries in Malay girls' schools from 1884 to 1939. There were also school libraries in English and Chinese schools. However, these could be discussed in another article as the discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

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