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# AMERICANS IN COLONIAL SARAWAK: A LITTLE HISTORY

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## INTRODUCTION

When Sarawak was under foreign control, not all palefaced strangers were British. Among the lesser invaders were a few Americans.These men came to Borneo for specific purposes. During the 1850s the purpose for Joseph Balestier was to extend American political and economic influence in Southeast Asia. The purpose for both William Hornaday and William Abbott was exploitation and exportation of natural history, or, as they saw it, the purpose was to serve science in the United States. The late nineteenth-century purpose for William Furness was to explore Borneo cultures, but after 1900 he became, instead, a promoter for rich Americans who backed a failed scheme to make high-grade rubber from forestjelutong in Sarawak. After World War I, Victor Heiser visited Sarawak to encourage health improvement in the country. Toward the end of another world war, Americans were involved in the Allied offensives against the Japanese on Borneo. American Christian missionaries also arrived over the years with their own agenda, and they provided some practical benefits. Whatever the intention of sundry Americans in Sarawak, they shared two ideas with their European cousins: that they had a right to travel where they chose and that the United States had a right to play a major role in the world.

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When Sarawak was under foreign control, not all pale-faced strangers were British. Among the lesser invaders were a few Americans. These men came to Borneo for specific purposes. During the 1850s the purpose for Joseph Balestier was to extend American political and economic influence in Southeast Asia. The purpose for both William Hornaday and William Abbott was exploitation and exportation of natural history, or, as they saw it, the purpose was to serve science in the United States. The late nineteenth-century purpose for William Furness was to explore Borneo cultures, but after 1900 he became, instead, a promoter for rich Americans who backed a failed scheme to make high-grade rubber from forest *jelutong* in Sarawak. After World War I, Victor Heiser visited Sarawak to encourage health improvement in the country. Toward the end of another world war, Americans were involved in the Allied offensives against the Japanese on Borneo. American Christian missionaries also arrived over the years with their own agenda, and they provided some practical benefits. Whatever the intention of sundry Americans in Sarawak, they shared two ideas with their European cousins: that they had a right to travel where they chose and that the United States had a right to play a major role in the world.

## EARLY AMERICAN CONTACT WITH NORTHERN BORNEO

By the nineteenth century, American merchants were entrenched in the "China trade," but this sphere also included many parts of Southeast Asia where foreign ships vied for direct access to exotic

products.[1] For example, in 1831 an American pepper-trading ship was captured and plundered in northeastern Sumatra, which resulted in a murderous reprisal by an American frigate on the Sumatran town of Kuala Batu. Andrew Jackson, the U.S. president at that time, thereupon fostered attempts to obtain treaties outside of European strongholds that offered security to U.S. vessels in Southeast Asian ports, including those in Borneo. The first attempt was with Bangkok where a treaty was signed in 1833. The second attempt was with Brunei, where the warship U.S.S. Constitution arrived in 1845 with the offer of a commercial treaty and coastal protection. The Brunei Sultan rejected this offer but the visit spurred Brunei, and also the Brooke regime in Sarawak, to press the British for similar action.[2] However, five years later Brunei did sign a treaty with the Americans.

One aftermath of this American effort was the chicanery of the first U.S. counsel to Brunei, Charles (or Claude) L. Moses who arrived there in 1865.[3] He obtained a lease on an immense tract of land in northern Borneo which he turned into "The American Trading Company of Borneo." The company's president was an American businessman, Joseph Torrey, who was designated in Brunei as "Raja of Ambong and Marudu and Supreme Ruler of the whole of the northern portion of Borneo."[4] After feeble attempts at setting up a plantation and trading post on Kimanis Bay, the debt-ridden scheme collapsed. Torrey later went to New York and made sensational claims about gold in Borneo to woo investors there to finance the company, but he was roundly rebuffed.[5] Nor was the U.S. government convinced by him that a naval base was needed on Banggi Island.[6]

## THE SPECIAL ENVOY

By the late nineteenth century all of Southeast Asia, except for Thailand, was under the colonial control of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain (the Philippines), and Portugal (Timor). Outside of maritime commerce, the United States was little involved with the region. The few attempts it made for foreign-policy influence in

Southeast Asia were weak and, in the case of Sarawak, curious. While Sarawak has long existed without noticeable American attention, the United States became the first country to recognise Sarawak as a sovereign state. This occurred when the first "White Rajah," James Brooke, was absent from Sarawak, but he clearly approved of this recognition.

Joseph Balestier, the first American consul in Singapore, travelled around Southeast Asia on government business.[7] Fresh from a failure to obtain a new commercial treaty for the United States with Siam, due largely to the fact that he lost his temper, he arrived in Kuching in 1850 with a letter from President Zachary Taylor. This visit was a two-way success. The letter from Taylor addressed Brooke as "Sovereign Prince of Sarawak" and thanked him "in the name of the American nation for his exertions in the suppression of piracy." It also complemented Brooke on his noble and "humane endeavors to bring his subjects and the neighboring tribes of Malays into a condition of civilization."[8] In Kuching, Balestier saluted the flag of Sarawak, which James Brooke later described as "a great honor paid by a great nation." This was quite different from the way Brooke was being treated by the British government, which stubbornly withheld recognition of sovereignty.[9] An agreement of peace, friendship, and commerce was the outcome of this American visit.[10] Brooke went on to use the American acknowledgment of Sarawak's independence to pester the British for the same formal recognition of his state and of his status as its ruler.

## NATURAL HISTORIANS

Alfred Wallace was the best known English naturalist to collect animals in Sarawak for the glory of science.[11] His most impressive Sarawak collection was 19 orangutans from the Simunjan swamp forests in 1855. The American William Temple Hornaday followed in Wallace's footsteps to Simunjan, also for the purpose of collecting orangutans — many more of them. Hornaday collected 43 there in the 1870s.[12] He had obtained a roving commission to obtain animal specimens, not from any museum or university but from an

American businessman who ran a company that sold specimens to all comers, academic, amateur, or otherwise. Being a noted taxidermist and big-game enthusiast, Hornaday later "designed" two stuffed orangutan exhibits for display.[13] The one that went to the American Museum of Natural History in New York showed five orangutans "...of various sizes and ages feeding on durions [sic], sleeping in a nest, sitting, and swinging."[14] The other exhibit of orangutans went to the United States National Museum (Smithsonian Institution). That exhibit was "a trifle sensational," depicting two "hideously ugly" male orangutans fighting tooth and nail in the tree tops.[15] It was a huge success.

Hornaday found people, both in Asia and the United States, to be less to his liking than animals. In Southeast Asia he complained of the "ignorant and maladroit native servants" and the "abominations of Chinese cookery."[16] He also asserted that Iban never used blowpipes. Later, when he was director of the New York Zoological Garden (familiarly known as the Bronx Zoo), he referred to himself pompously as "Mr. Hornaday." He was given to self-flattery along with criticism of those who had their own thoughts about his plans for wildlife conservation, especially his ideas on saving the American bison from over-hunting by people who were not "sportsmen."[17]

William Louis Abbott, another American natural historian, was trained in medicine but became a collector of native plants and animals in Southeast Asia after he inherited a large sum of money. He also collected material-culture items for the Smithsonian.

Abbott disliked Victorian era lifestyles, including the stuffy air in overheated houses, and also disliked colonialism. Although generally a misanthrope, he enjoyed being with "wild tribes." Working from his schooner, the Terrapin, he visited many parts of Southeast Asia, determined to get to the remotest people before European ideas contaminated them, but he only marginally got to Sarawak.[18] His 1905 trip to Bidayuh country in the headwaters of the Landak and Sekaham rivers took him within shouting distance of what is now the international border crossing on the road above Tebedu. There he observed and sketched a Bidayuh men's round house