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The Role of The Brooke Rajahs: Promoting The Natural History of Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

From 1842 until 1946, three members of the English family Brooke governed the State of Sarawak in succession: Rajah Sir James Brooke (from 1842 until his death in 1868), his nephew Rajah Sir Charles Brooke (1868 – 1917), and his son His Highness Rajah Sir C. Vyner Brooke (1917 – 1946). None of these men, nor the wives of the latter two (Ranee Margaret, and Ranee Sylvia, respectively) personally studied the Natural History of Sarawak, but each of the three Rajahs created opportunities for others to investigate and record the rich natural resources of the State. In 1838, although drawn by the opportunity for profit from trade in the rich and accessible deposit of antimony ore (stibnite) in the Sarawak river, James Brooke's first act on landing at Santubong was to hunt a local pigeon and wild pigs. Once securely installed as Rajah, he engaged specialists to investigate the geology, natural resources and indigenous population of his territory. In 1853-54, he invited the naturalist collector Alfred R. Wallace to start his exploration of the 'Malay Archipelago' at Sarawak. During his stay, Wallace benefited from Rajah Brooke's hospitality at Santubong (where he wrote his first paper on speciation: 'the Sarawak Law'), and at Peninjau (where he made fabulous collections of night-flying moths). Wallace also sold specimens of orangutans to British museums. In 1865, after Rajah James had retired to England, as acting Head of Government, Charles Brooke welcomed the Italian collectors, Giacomo Doria and Edoardo Beccari. Doria did not stay long, but Beccari established himself at a favourable spot on the hillside of Mt Matang. Beccari recorded his travels and discoveries in an Italian publication *Nelle Foreste di Borneo*; Ranee Margaret later promoted an English translation, for which she provided photographs.

Keywords: Rajah Brooke, natural history, antimony ore, Sarawak history



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Beccari's departure, Rajah Charles took over his residence on Matang and opened a tea estate nearby. In 1876, Rajah Charles arranged accommodation there for the botanical artist Marianne North. On her second visit (1880) he sent her to the Borneo Company's cinnabar mines at Tegora. There she met another visiting naturalist, A.H. Everett, whose (unproductive) search for the remains of ancient humans in Sarawak caves was sponsored by the Royal Society and British Academy. Everett remained in Sarawak, employed by Rajah Charles in various capacities; he collected keenly, and published checklists of mammals and birds of Borneo. Everett inspired Cadet Charles Hose to collect and, together, they achieved the first scientific exploration of Mt Dulit, an action approved by the Rajah. Charles Brooke's most significant contribution was the foundation of the Sarawak Museum, opened in 1891. He decreed the collecting policy, and established the post of Curator, with considerable freedom to investigate aspects of the natural history of Sarawak. Support for the Museum, in Kuching, and the liberal working conditions of the Curator, were continued by the last Rajah, His Highness Sir Vyner Brooke. In 1919, he established a Forest Department, with the remit to assess the resource. Rajah Vyner also appointed E. Banks as Curator of the Museum. He was the longest holder of this post. Self-identified as a 'naturalist', Banks's innovations included regulation of the edible-birds'-nest caves — an action that later proved influential on the role of the Museum in archaeological investigations by his successor, after the Cession of Sarawak to Britain.

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INTRODUCTION

The historian Sir Steven Runciman (1960: ix) concluded that: 'The whole history of Sarawak under its White Rajahs is not easy to write. The raw material is at times abundant, but at other times full of gaps'. To fill one of these gaps, the following pages assess the contribution to the natural history of Sarawak made, in turn, by each the three Brooke Rajahs.

The unusual constitutional history of this Malaysian State has been well chronicled. For just over a century (1842-1946) Sarawak was governed by members of the English family of Brooke. As Heads of State, they were styled 'Rajahs', and held the governance of Sarawak (the bounds of which were progressively enlarged until 1905) in exchange for annual payments, or agreed lump sums, paid to successive Rulers of Brunei Darussalam, or to individual Brunei *Pengiran* and their families who held territorial rights under Brunei custom and law.

The first Rajah was James Brooke (born 1803, died 1868), followed by his sister's son Charles (b. 1829, d. 1917) and, finally, Charles's eldest surviving British son,¹ Vyner (b. 1874, d. 1963). Although autocratic heads of an independent State, none of

¹ Rajah Charles's first acknowledged son was born to Dayang Mastiah bt Abang Aing of Simanggang in 1867, named Isaka, later shortened to Esca, adopted by the childless Rev. W. Y. Daykin with an allowance of £100 p.a., and settled in Canada. Esca Daykin received a gratuity of £500 in 1948, in respect of the cession of Sarawak to Britain. He died in 1953.

the Rajahs relinquished British citizenship and, indeed, all were awarded honours by the British Crown. In old age, all retired to properties in England. After death, all three were buried in adjoining tombs in the churchyard at Sheepstor, in Devon county, southwest England.

There are no records to indicate that any one of the three Rajahs, or their consorts, engaged personally in the study of natural history. Nonetheless, as shown below, all created opportunities for others to investigate the rich and varied wildlife resource of Sarawak, and to publish their findings. Testament to this support was given by the specialists who described previously unknown forms of plant or animal life, using epithets based on the Brooke family name, or title. The earliest example was the shrub *Rhododendron brookeanum* (Lindley and Low, 1848), found in Sarawak by Hugh Low; followed by *Pithecus Brookei* (Blyth, 1853), now a rejected synonym of *Pongo pygmaeus* (L.), the Borneo orangutan; and, most enduring, Rajah Brooke's birdwing butterfly *Trogonoptera brookei*, found in Sarawak and described by A.R. Wallace (1855a). Others were Brooke's squirrel *Sundasciurus brookei* (Thomas, 1892); the sambar deer of Sarawak *Rusa unicolor brookei* (Hose, 1893b); Rajah's Scops owl *Otus brookei* (Sharpe, 1892), a pitcher plant *Nepenthes brookei*, also collected by Hugh Low but on Mt Kinabalu, Sabah; a stag beetle, and three geckos.

1. Sir James Brooke KCB

On 11th August, 1838, James Brooke's armed schooner *Royalist* crossed the bar at the Santubong mouth of the Sarawak river and anchored in water of 7-7½ fathoms. Impressed by the surroundings, James Brooke wrote in his diary: 'The scenery is noble. On the left hand is the peak of Santubong, clothed in verdure nearly to the top; at his foot, a luxuriant vegetation, fringed with casuarinas, and terminating in a beach of white sand. The right bank of the river is low, covered in pale green mangroves' (Keppel, 1847, vol. 1: 26). On 12th August, Brooke went ashore with his gun, and made his first observations on the wildlife of Sarawak: 'There was a fine species of large pigeon of a grey colour that I was desirous of getting; but they were too cunning. Plenty of wild hogs were seen, but as shy as though they had been fired on all their lives.' Foiled in the hunt, but intent on the diplomatic objective of his first visit, James Brooke sent a boat upstream to inform the representative of the government of Brunei at Kuching, Raja Muda Hashim, of his arrival and, on the next day, followed himself in *Royalist*.

James Brooke kept a diary, recording his actions and his aspirations. Published excerpts are available through secondary sources (Keppel, 1847; Mundy,