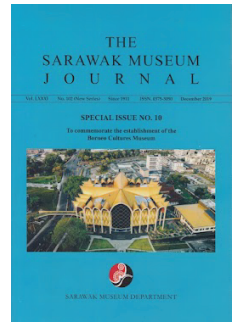




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“SECOND TO NONE IN THE EAST”: REASSESSING THE BIRTH OF THE SARAWAK MUSEUM

Jennifer R. Morris

INTRODUCTION

The foundation and early history of the Sarawak Museum have long been the subject of a number of legends and misconceptions, particularly in relation to the role of naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace. This paper draws on in-depth archival research into the history of science and collecting in the Brooke State to reassess the origins of the Museum, in the political, economic and social context of late-nineteenth-century Southeast Asia. Through analysis of the colonial contexts which shaped the worldviews of both James and Charles Brooke, their attitudes to science and their political motivations, I conclude that the Museum was founded at a significant juncture in the development of Charles Brooke's political authority in Sarawak. At the point of its conception, the Museum was intended to function as a political tool, representing the Rajah's ambitions for Sarawak as a contender on a regional and global stage. Although not directly influenced by Wallace, it was also a product of the thriving atmosphere of scientific endeavour that was actively cultivated by the Brooke government, and which would – partly through the work of the Museum – become an important legacy of their rule.

Keywords:

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INTRODUCTION

There are several stories about the origin of the Sarawak Museum. There is no doubt the idea first started from a suggestion from Alfred Russel Wallace when he visited the country...it seems certain Wallace persuaded Brooke to have a Museum.¹

So wrote Edward Banks, retired curator of the aforementioned museum, in a ‘reminiscence’ published in *The Sarawak Museum Journal* in 1983. Banks, who was curator between 1925 and 1945 – and therefore never actually met either James or Charles Brooke – provides no reference for these ‘certain’ recollections about the Museum’s genesis. Nonetheless, we probably have him to thank for the pervasive legends surrounding the foundation of this institution, which is one of Kuching’s most familiar

landmarks today. The idea that the Museum was founded at the insistence of Wallace has reoccurred constantly in news articles, travel guides and scholarly publications for decades. This ‘fact’ usually appears alongside the assertions that the Museum is the oldest in Borneo, was founded some time during the 1880s–90s (the dates given in many sources vary) and that the building was designed by Charles Brooke’s French valet in the style of a Normandy town hall.² The latter claim has been convincingly disproved by architectural historian John Ting, but the others persist.³ While the illustrious history of this institution is much-feted, in-depth research into this history was, until recently, lacking.⁴ My two years of investigation into the Sarawak Museum’s foundation and development during the Brooke period have sought to redress this. In light of this research, this paper will reconsider the story of the Sarawak Museum’s birth and address the misconceptions that persist in popular interpretations.

The Sarawak Museum was indeed the first such institution to be established on the island of Borneo, with the British North Borneo Museum at Sandakan following in fits and starts over the turn of the century. There is much confusion in popular sources, however, regarding the date of the Sarawak Museum’s foundation. This is perhaps due to the gradual manner of its development over its first decades. Charles Brooke first mooted the idea of a museum in 1878, announcing his intentions to set one up in the *Sarawak Gazette*.⁵ The project was slow to take off and the first public gallery was only declared open eight years later, in 1886.⁶ The permanent museum building, which still houses part of the state collection today, opened in 1891.⁷ Why did Charles decide to found a museum at this point and was it really down to the influence of Wallace? What motivated him to persevere with the project despite the initial lack of interest from his government officers? And what were his long-term goals for the Sarawak Museum?

Founding a museum, and constructing a purpose-built premises for the storage and display of its collections, was no small trifle in nineteenth-century Sarawak, where government budgets were precarious and stretched across many competing priorities. Rajah Charles Brooke himself admitted at the opening of the Museum building in 1891 that it had “cost a good deal both of trouble and of money” to reach this point.⁸ Would a leader in Brooke’s position embark on such a project on the suggestion of one visiting, although admittedly eminent, scholar? In order to understand the history of the Museum and, importantly, its legacy for both science, culture and museology in Sarawak and Malaysia, it is necessary to analyse the wider political, social and cultural context in which it was founded – beyond the social interactions

between the Brookes and Wallace – and to draw out the complex motivations behind Charles Brooke’s commitment to this project. In doing so, we can begin to understand the significance of Sarawak in early Western scientific knowledge-gathering in Southeast Asia. In addition, this reveals the key role played by the Brookes in the cultivation of an atmosphere of scientific enquiry and the facilitation of research and collecting in the state.

Class, collecting and colonialism

Late-nineteenth century Europe was in the grip of a museum-making craze. Since the foundation of the British Museum in 1753, public repositories of collections amassed by amateur scientists, antiquarians and art lovers had been springing up across the continent and, increasingly, in European colonies as well. These public museums, particularly in Britain, were founded on the dual principles of Enlightenment thought – the belief that to understand the world, one must utilise empirical observation and rational categorisation – and liberal ideals of ‘rational recreation’, which came together to form “the public face of scientific endeavour”.⁹ By the mid-1800s, ‘science’ as we understand it today was beginning to take shape as an academic discipline, forged from the efforts of amateur gentleman-scholars who prioritised systematic collecting of flora, fauna and cultural artefacts. In Britain, these collectors gathered in scientific societies, whose combined collections formed the nuclei of museums. These early institutions were focused on scientific study, seeking to amass fully representative, ‘encyclopaedic’ collections of nature and human cultures. Meanwhile, political developments saw British towns and cities prioritise the construction of public facilities such as museums and libraries, based on the belief that an expansion of popular education was essential for the wellbeing of the lower classes, and would reduce the risk of social unrest at the height of this era of industrialisation and social change. Elite philanthropists sought to foster an ethic of self-improvement amongst the working classes through the development of such municipal facilities, as ‘rational’ options for working people to spend their leisure time.¹⁰

In British colonial territories, too, the museum-making impulse had, by this stage, begun to take hold. Much scholarship has focused on the role of museums and scientific collecting in the establishment and maintenance of colonial power. For example, the Foucauldian theories of Tony Bennett and Benedict Anderson characterise colonial museums as sites of control. Anderson, in the second edition of his celebrated work *Imagined Communities*,