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The Museum almost Wasn't: Excavating The Myths and History of The Early Sarawak Museum

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ABSTRACT

The conceptual origins of the Sarawak Museum in the 19th Century are replete with myths and legends. Despite the widespread acceptance in Museum brochures and articles since the Second World War, a review of the Brooke and Wallace letters and other contemporary documents indicate that Alfred Russel Wallace's friendship with Rajah James Brooke and Rajah Charles Brooke was not a stimulus to the establishment of the Sarawak Museum. Rather the Museum was the product of a combination of factors. The Brooke's attendance at the Great Exhibitions in London in 1851 and 1862 played a critical role, as did the promulgation of other local museums throughout Asia and Australia. Local collection and exhibition of particular items of prestige and supernatural power may have also played a part. Finally, the Museum faced a major crisis, instigated by curator J.E.A. Lewis, that almost constrained the Museum's activities and expansion.

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THE OPENING

On the 4th of August in 1891 a strange procession of upward of four-hundred persons of all races, ages and genders – Malays, Chinese, Bidayuh, Iban, Europeans and others, strolled toward a towering building atop one of the highest points overlooking Kuching. They had been invited to be present at the formal opening of the new Sarawak Museum by His Highness Charles Brooke, the Rajah. The large size of the crowd pressed the capacity of the museum to hold such large numbers, which at the time consisted only of the West Wing of the Queen Anne-style building. Of the 3–400 present only about ten percent were Europeans. The Rajah punctually arrived at 5 PM and gave a brief speech, first in English and then in Malay, to the assembled.