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CHARLES HOSE AND BORNEO

Brian Durrans

(This talk was given at the Holiday Inn, Kuching, on August 1, 1988 at the kind invitation of the Orang Ulu National Association, with the co-operation of the Symposium on Sarawak Cultural Heritage.)

It was 100 years ago this month that Charles Hose was appointed Officer in Charge of the Baram District of Sarawak. He was then just 25 years old which of course is precisely how long Sarawak has been part of Malaysia. So this is not only the right country but also an appropriate time in which to consider Hose's career. But before examining details of what Hose did, perhaps it's worth asking why he should be of interest to us at all. One answer is that Hose made a double contribution to Sarawak's past. In his administrative work, he helped shape the political futures of several peoples in the 4th Division — the Iban, Kenyah, Kayan and others. In his writings, photographs and artefact collections, he bequeathed to us a major resource for studying their traditional cultures.

You might think this is enough. Let us consider the evidence which Hose has passed down to us, you might say, but leave the study of Hose himself to historians of the Brooke period when they run out of other interesting individuals to write about. But the man and his work cannot be so conveniently separated. Hose left a mark not only on Sarawak's past but also on the evidence of that past. The lives of the Baram peoples don't come down to us unmediated. It was Hose who was recording the information, and like anyone else he concentrated on aspects which interested him.

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The key point, then, is that in giving us something of Borneo, Hose also gives us something of himself. If you want to know what life was like a hundred years ago on the Baram you need of course to read what Hose wrote, but you have to bear in mind that the author left a lot out and that what he did write was organised by ideas peculiar to his own time and personality. There's a lesson in that, I suggest, for the way we ourselves document, interpret and seek to develop cultures at the present time. We have a better grasp of history and anthropology than anyone had in the last century and we are also more aware of the obstacles to objective recording