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SARAWAK MUSEUM CENTENARY**Earl of Cranbrook¹**

"Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo" (The great march of the centuries begins anew)
VIRGIL (70- 19 BC)

Today, we welcome together the 100th year (plus a day) of the official opening of the Sarawak Museum Old Building. It is also, almost to the day, the 35th anniversary of my arrival in Sarawak to take up my first professional job in this same Museum. The foundation of the Museum unfolded from the careful plans of the Rajah Charles Brooke, and has been an enduring influence in the State. My venture was more impetuous but had equally profound effects on my life. It started lines of research that I have pursued through a productive and fulfilling career. It opened my eyes to the world of museums which continues to absorb me. Above all, it brought me into contact with the people of Sarawak and founded friendships which have lasted to this day.

As my opening quotation shows, for more than two millennia mankind has been conscious of the parade of years and, at intervals, has taken occasion to celebrate the past while simultaneously looking forward to new targets. I propose this afternoon to talk about the origin of museums, to discuss the role of museums today, drawing mainly on British examples and particularly on my own experience, and finally- with these examples in mind- to look briefly at directions in which the Sarawak Museum might possibly develop in its next 100 years.

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**address by the*

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Museums In History

It seems to be a natural human instinct to amass objects of beauty, value or curiosity and to display these for others to admire. The application of this instinct and the disposition of private or public collections is an essential background to all museums. But a true museum involves more than this. The classical Greek word *mouseion*, from which 'museum' is derived, means a home for the Muses, the nine goddesses of the arts and history. The prototype, founded by Alexander the Great (Iskander Jaya in the legends of Southeast Asia) at his city Alexandria in the fourth century B.C., was a centre of scholarship, housing art collections and the famous library, and served as the greatest university of the ancient Greek and Roman civilisation.

* The above address was delivered at the Dewan Tun Abdul Razak – Conference Hall on 5th August, 1991.

¹ Lord Cranbrook is Chairman of English Nature, the Nature Conservancy Council for England. He is also Chairman of the Lord Shop Museum Project, Leiston, Suffolk, U.K.; a board member of the Museum for East Anglian Life, Stowmarket, Suffolk; and a former trustee of the British Museum (Natural History), now the Natural History Museum, London. He worked at the Sarawak Museum as Technical Assistant to the Curator, 1956–58, and is still Hon. Curator of Mammals.

This museum survived almost 1000 years until Alexandria was sacked by the Arabs in 640 A.D., after a 14-month siege. When asked to decide the fate of the library (reputed to have contained 700,000 volumes), the Caliph Omar made his legendary judgment that, if the books contained the same doctrine as the Holy Koran, they were redundant and, if they did not, they should be destroyed; therefore (seemingly for administrative convenience) all could be destroyed. The books were thereupon consigned for burning at the city's public baths where, it is said, they heated the water for the next six months!

At this time, as the Islamic empire arose in the eastern Mediterranean, northwestern Europe was emerging from the dire period of the Dark Ages during which populations had fallen drastically, many of the monuments of the Roman empire had been looted or destroyed and most of its technology and cultural traditions lost. In contemporary Southeast Asia, contact was opening between China and the Nanyang. This trade was dominated by the exchange of collectable objects! At both ends of the trading routes, social leaders were esteemed for the possession of cultural products such as jars, hornbill ivory, beads or textiles. In China, aesthetic and literary scholarship certainly flourished; but I am not aware that any society in the region produced the notion of a public collection for reference, study or research – a museum in the sense defined above.

In Europe the term 'museum' remained in abeyance until revived by John Tradescant, the younger, who in 1656 published *Museum Tradescantianum*, 179-page catalogue of 'rarities and curiosities', collected mainly by his father in the course of travels and explorations. The catalogue lists birds, quadrupeds, fish, shells, insects, minerals, fruits, war instruments, articles of dress, utensils, coins and medals, as well as an inventory of plants in his botanical garden. After the death of Tradescant (and, somewhat later, his wife) the collection passed to his friend Elias Ashmole and, through his generosity, in 1683 to the University of Oxford where it formed the core of what is now known (some say, unfairly) as the Ashmolean Museum.

As exploration opened up the world to European nations in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Tradescant/Ashmole museum had copious imitators. Many voyages were inspired by mercantile motives and the intrepid explorers (and their passengers and crews) found a ready market for curiosities from distant places. Much remained in the cabinets of private hobbyists, but the owners of several large and miscellaneous collections put them on public display, often defraying their expenses by an admission charge.

The greatest English collector of the 18th century was Sir Hans Sloane, president of the College of Physicians and of the Royal Society. By 1733 his collection exceeded 69,000 items and his library 40,000 manuscripts. By the terms of his Will, the Sloane collection was bequeathed to the nation, so that these things "tending many ways to the manifestation of the glory of God, the improvement of the arts and sciences, and benefit of mankind, may remain together . . . in and about the city of London, where they may, by the great confluence of people, be of most use". In 1753 Parliament voted the funds and in 1759 the British Museum was opened.