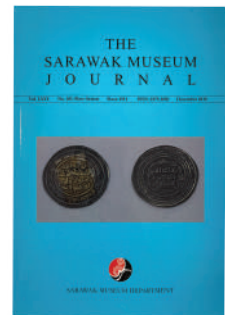




The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXXX No. 101

December 2018



ISSN: 0375-3050
E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Barry Scott Zellen (2018). The 'Forgotten Hemingway' of Sarawak's Literary Borderlands: Rediscovering The Prolific Literary Oeuvre of Raneë Sylvia Brooke. *The Sarawak Museum Journal*, LXXX (101): 55-70

The 'Forgotten Hemingway' of Sarawak's Literary Borderlands: Rediscovering The Prolific Literary Oeuvre of Raneë Sylvia Brooke

Barry Scott Zellen

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, while conducting research on the role of crossborder indigenous homelands in world politics – the topic of a multiyear research project funded by the Kone Foundation of Helsinki in 2016 and 2017, and the topic of my other paper presented at this year's BRC conference – I've become intrigued, and later fascinated, and for a time completely obsessed, by the largely-forgotten literary contributions of Sarawak's second and final Raneë, Lady Sylvia Brooke (née Brett), who occupied a unique vantage point in the literary borderland of British Southeast Asia with her dual role as a member of Sarawak's ruling dynasty while at the same time serving as a vocal champion of those marginalised and dispossessed by British colonialism.



**THE ‘FORGOTTEN HEMINGWAY’ OF
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REDISCOVERING THE PROLIFIC LITERARY
OEUVRE OF RANEE SYLVIA BROOKE**

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, while conducting research on the role of crossborder indigenous homelands in world politics – the topic of a multiyear research project funded by the Kone Foundation of Helsinki in 2016 and 2017, and the topic of my other paper presented at this year’s BRC conference – I’ve become intrigued, and later fascinated, and for a time completely obsessed, by the largely-forgotten literary contributions of Sarawak’s second and final Ranee, Lady Sylvia Brooke (née Brett), who occupied a unique vantage point in the literary borderland of British Southeast Asia with her dual role as a member of Sarawak’s ruling dynasty while at the same time serving as a vocal champion of those marginalised and dispossessed by British colonialism.

Lady Sylvia is a controversial historical figure in her own right, as captured in the original title of Philip Eade’s favourably reviewed 2007 biography, *Sylvia, Queen of the Headhunters: An Outrageous Englishwoman and Her Lost Kingdom* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson), whose title was itself moderated when reissued by Picador in 2014, changing “Outrageous” to “Eccentric,” in recognition, I believe, of the original title’s exaggeration.¹ Many did indeed believe she was truly outrageous, particularly British colonial elites who found themselves on the receiving end of her critical portrayals. But she was not really an eccentric (“unconventional and slightly strange,” according to Dictionary.com – though the first half of this definition, “unconventional,” is accurate; but “slightly strange” seems unnecessarily disparaging.) She was brilliant, yes; ahead-of-her-times, most surely; an iconoclast (“a person who attacks cherished beliefs or institutions”), most definitely – she was bold, ambitious, and unafraid of attacking cherished beliefs or institutions, characteristics well-suited for a writer, even if unorthodox for a reigning queen.

Sylvia was widely (and vehemently) criticised in official colonial circles for her tendency to meddle in high politics, particularly on matters of succession and in opposition to the cession of Sarawak to Britain, pitting her interests as the last Ranee against those of the British Empire at the zenith of its power.² Irking British colonial elites even more than her efforts to influence politics was her open and enthusiastic defence of those marginalised from power in British Southeast Asia. As Ranee, however, she was royal consort to the Rajah, deeply involved in the affairs of state, and deeply committed to the wellbeing of Sarawakians; what her critics saw as unwelcome meddling, she saw as her moral duty.

A WRITER, FIRST AND FOREMOST

Before marrying into the last generation of the Brooke dynasty, Lady Sylvia was a young and successful writer under the tutelage of British literary giants George Bernard Shaw and J.M. Barrie. She published early, and often, amassing an impressive publications list by any measure in the genres of novel, short story, stage play, film treatment, and essay throughout her life. She was an impassioned voice in defense of those marginalised from society, from London's impoverished working class to the many disenfranchised natives and minorities of the British Empire.

The lone published scholar of Lady Sylvia's literature, Dr. Alan L. McLeod, a professor emeritus of English at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, has described her as a pioneering feminist writer, though a closer look at her many works penned across her six decades of writing shows her concerns with economic inequality and racial injustice to be as central to her platform as issues of gender and the sexual exploitation of minors, which permeate her many works of fiction.³ McLeod describes her literary contribution as follows: "Although her characters are seldom well-developed, her plots are uncomplicated, her descriptions not always memorable, and her style far from exemplary, Sylvia Brooke's themes are – though predictable and seldom varied – significant. Primary among them is 'eliminating the oppression of all people who are marginalised by the dominant culture' – especially abused girls, Eurasians, and women themselves. And while it could not be claimed that she is a major author, she deserves a place on the periphery of the canon – at least of Malaysian writing in English."

Since my first visit to Singapore and Malaysia twelve years ago, I've grown increasingly intrigued by Lady Sylvia's vast oeuvre, and continue to