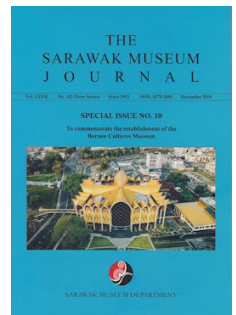




# The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXXXI No. 102

December 2019



ISSN: 0375-3050

Citation: *Sarawak Museum Journal*, LXXXI (102) (2019): 201-224

## ***“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.<sup>1</sup>

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