From 1842 until 1946, three members of the English family Brooke governed the State of Sarawak in succession: Rajah Sir James Brooke (from 1842 until his death in 1868), his nephew Rajah Sir Charles Brooke (1868 – 1917), and his son His Highness Rajah Sir C. Vyner Brooke (1917 – 1946). None of these men, nor the wives of the latter two (Ranee Margaret, and Ranee Sylvia, respectively) personally studied the Natural History of Sarawak, but each of the three Rajahs created opportunities for others to investigate and record the rich natural resources of the State. In 1838, although drawn by the opportunity for profit from trade in the rich and accessible deposit of antimony ore (stibnite) in the Sarawak river, James Brooke’s first act on landing at Santubong was to hunt a local pigeon and wild pigs. Once securely installed as Rajah, he engaged specialists to investigate the geology, natural resources and indigenous population of his territory. In 1853-54, he invited the naturalist collector Alfred R. Wallace to start his exploration of the ‘Malay Archipelago’ at Sarawak. During his stay, Wallace benefited from Rajah Brooke’s hospitality at Santubong (where he wrote his first paper on speciation: ‘the Sarawak Law’), and at Peninjau (where he made fabulous collections of night-flying moths). Wallace also sold specimens of orangutans to British museums. In 1865, after Rajah James had retired to England, as acting Head of Government, Charles Brooke welcomed the Italian collectors, Giacomo Doria and Edoardo Beccari. Doria did not stay long, but Beccari established himself at a favourable spot on the hillside of Mt Matang. Beccari recorded his travels and discoveries in an Italian publication Nelle Foreste di Borneo; Ranee Margaret later promoted an English translation, for which she provided photographs.

Keywords: Rajah Brooke, natural history, antimony ore, Sarawak history
THE ROLE OF THE BROOKE RAJAHS: PROMOTING THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

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