



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LIII No. 74

December 1998



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Gary Maitland. (1998). Sarawak Museum, The Museum of Borneo. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LIII (74): 95-108

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the Sarawak Museum is one of the establishment and operation of a British scientific and cultural institution in an insignificant outpost of the British Empire. The Sarawak Museum was conceived in 1856 by the first Rajah of Sarawak, Sir James Brooke, while its development into a renowned international natural history museum was largely due to the support of the second and third Rajahs of Sarawak, Sir Charles Brooke and his son, Sir Vyner Brooke. The latter two Rajahs were responsible for issuing decrees that established the Museum, providing public funding for the Museum and selecting curators who, with the agreement of the Rajahs, determined the course of development of the Museum without the intervention of either a board of trustees or Sarawak's civil servants. The Museum also functioned as a cultural centre incorporating many non-museum activities and public entertainments.

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From its inception the Sarawak Museum was presented to the world as the Museum of Borneo's natural history and ethnology, although actual collecting and ethnological research was limited to a geographical area that occupied one fifth of the island of Borneo and included Sarawak and Mount Kinabalu, British North Borneo. Borneo was important to Western understanding of natural science because of the wealth and uniqueness of its flora and fauna which was promoted by prominent European scientists, like Charles Hose and Alfred Wallace, whose collections of Bornean natural history was eagerly sought by Western museums. The claim by Sarawak Museum curators that the Museum was *the* centre of Bornean scientific research remained valid while the Museum focused on natural history classification, but once ecology and the newer sciences came to the fore during the 1920s such a claim was no longer tenable. Sarawak Museum curators were the only scientists resident in British Borneo who published scientific papers on Borneo and systematically collected, exchanged and donated natural history specimens to Western Museums. Dutch scientists were doing similar work in the larger territory of Dutch Borneo and their collections were deposited in either the local natural history museum in Batavia, Java or in the national science collections housed in Leyden in the Netherlands.¹ By restricting Bornean scientific material to its own museums and by not making available English translations of their research in Dutch Borneo until the

1920s and 1930s Dutch scientists forfeited to the Sarawak Museum the international recognition of being the Museum of Bornean science.

During the Brooke's rule two other museums opened in Borneo, one a public health museum in 1929 at Kuching, Sarawak², and a museum at Sandakan, British North Borneo, which operated initially as a natural history and ethnographical museum from 1895 to 1905 and later was re-opened in 1925 as an ethnographical museum³. The pre-eminence of the Sarawak Museum as the leading public museum on Bornean natural history depended on substantial public funding and support by the local British ruling elite, the employment of qualified scientists as professional curators, systematic field collecting and description of new and rare natural history species (with the support of Western specialists), and the publication of the *Sarawak Museum Journal*, the only academic journal to deal exclusively with Bornean scientific matters.

The first eight curators of the Sarawak Museum were, with the exception of Dr Eric Mjöberg, graduates of Cambridge and Oxford Universities who communicated with their peers working in the museums of the British colonies of the Straits Settlements (Singapore) and the British protectorate of the Federated Malay States (Taiping, Perak and Kuala Lumpur, Selangor) and in European and American universities and museums. The professional reputation of the curators rested on publishing Bornean natural history and ethnographic studies in the journals of British scientific societies such as the Linnean Society, the Anthropological Institute, and the British Association, as well as the proceedings of the regional British learned societies, the journal of the Straits Branch (later renamed the Malay Branch) of the Royal Asiatic Society and from 1911 the *Sarawak Museum Journal*. On resignation or retirement all but two of these curators settled in England, taking with them valuable collections of Bornean natural history and ethnographia. At the successful completion of their triennial contracts these curators also usually visited British colonial museums on the way home to Britain where they contacted specialists in their fields of natural history study, researched European natural history and ethnology collections and attended scientific conferences.⁴

The scientific and museological operations of the Sarawak Museum were influenced by the evolving Western scientific disciplines of natural history, ethnology and anthropology, and by Western museum theory and practice promoted by the British Museums Association (BMA) throughout the countries of the British Empire. From the time the Sarawak Museum was admitted to the BMA in 1913, its curators adopted a number of museum practices discussed at the BMA's annual conference and in its *Museum*