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The Museum Almost Wasn't: Excavating The Myths and History of The Early Sarawak Museum

Gerrell M. Drawhorn

ABSTRACT

The conceptual origins of the Sarawak Museum in the 19th Century are replete with myths and legends. Despite the widespread acceptance in Museum brochures and articles since the Second World War, a review of the Brooke and Wallace letters and other contemporary documents indicate that Alfred Russel Wallace's friendship with Rajah James Brooke and Rajah Charles Brooke was not a stimulus to the establishment of the Sarawak Museum. Rather the Museum was the product of a combination of factors. The Brooke's attendance at the Great Exhibitions in London in 1851 and 1862 played a critical role, as did the promulgation of other local museums throughout Asia and Australia. Local collection and exhibition of particular items of prestige and supernatural power may have also played a part. Finally, the Museum faced a major crisis, instigated by curator J.E.A. Lewis, that almost constrained the Museum's activities and expansion.



THE MUSEUM ALMOST WASN'T: EXCAVATING THE MYTHS AND HISTORY OF THE EARLY SARAWAK MUSEUM

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THE OPENING

On the 4th of August in 1891 a strange procession of upward of four-hundred persons of all races, ages and genders – Malays, Chinese, Bidayuh, Iban, Europeans and others, strolled toward a towering building atop one of the highest points overlooking Kuching. They had been invited to be present at the formal opening of the new Sarawak Museum by His Highness Charles Brooke, the Rajah. The large size of the crowd pressed the capacity of the museum to hold such large numbers, which at the time consisted only of the West Wing of the Queen Anne-style building. Of the 3–400 present only about ten percent were Europeans. The Rajah punctually arrived at 5 PM and gave a brief speech, first in English and then in Malay, to the assembled.

“My Lord, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have invited you to be present this evening to inaugurate the Museum. It has cost a good deal both of trouble and of money but I consider *every Country worthy of being called a country should have a museum* and I hope that ours will be equal, at any rate, in time, to that of any other country in the East, including even India.

It has been for many years the wish of my heart to see a good museum established here and at last I hope that wish is accomplished; I trust that all will take an interest in the institution and help make it a success. I trust especially that the European community do their best to assist to increase the collection.”

The *Sarawak Gazette* (1st September, 1891) reported the enthusiastic locals appeared most fascinated with the natural history specimens, especially the showcase of several Mias in their forest habitat, while the Europeans were most attracted to examining the artefacts and clothing of the interior tribes.

THE WISH OF CHARLES BROOKE’S HEART? OR ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE’S?

There has been much speculation as to what stimulated Charles Brooke’s interest in forming a museum. One widespread tale is that the Museum was the brainchild of Alfred Russel Wallace and had been conveyed to Charles Brooke on the former’s visit to Sarawak in 1854–1856. While it is true that both James, and Charles Johnson Brooke were close acquaintances of Wallace, there is nothing in the preserved record to support this supposition.

The first to mention a Wallace connection in print was Tom Harrisson who was curator of the Sarawak Museum from 1947–1966 (Harrisson 1961: 26; 1963: 187).

“The Museum was founded by the great wisdom and insight of the second White Rajah Brooke, Sir Charles Brooke, partly under the influence of Alfred Russel Wallace. It was one of the innumerable things that Alfred Russel Wallace contributed to human knowledge. In my own mind Alfred Russel Wallace was in some ways a greater man than Charles Darwin...”

However, Harrisson may have acquired the tale¹ from his immediate predecessor Edward Banks as curator (1925–1945). Banks (1983: 59) in his “Reminiscence of a Curator” recalled:

“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 and orders were given for this. Later events delayed the start but Charles Brooke, the second Rajah, took his uncle’s orders seriously and went ahead with the scheme for a museum.”

Because of their roles as long-term curators that bridged both sides of the Second World War, this Banks-Harrisson interpretation has become integrated into almost every subsequent discussion of the history of the Sarawak Museum and Museum guides (e.g. Leh 1993; but intriguingly not Cranbrook and Leh 1983).

This version has even become confabulated more by Kevin Tan’s (2015) monumental history of the Raffles Museum “*Of Whales and Dinosaurs: The Story of Singapore’s Natural History Museum*” in which he credits Wallace as inspiring the Sarawak Museum as the first of the regions British-inspired Natural History Museums.

“Of the three museums under consideration, the oldest – technically speaking – is the Sarawak Museum, established by the Rajah Brooke in 1860 largely through the influence of the great naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace. However, it was not till October 1886 that a temporary museum was established at the Market Place along Gambier Street. A proper museum – the present one was built and opened on 4 August 1891, and a publication – the Sarawak Museum Journal – produced from 1911.” (Tan 2015)

Tan (2015) frustratingly gives no reference for the early date of inspiration and in what way the museum was “founded” in 1860.

But we can have good reason to doubt these undocumented, apocryphal stories. Most importantly, no curator earlier than Banks, nor any Charles Brooke contemporary, makes such an explicit relationship between Wallace and the Museum. John C. Moulton, who served as curator of the Sarawak Museum from 1908–1915, wrote two articles (1912, 1914b) retracing Wallace’s movements while collecting in Sarawak. If anyone would have had reason to mention a relationship between Wallace and the Museum it surely would have been Moulton. Yet neither article, nor a letter from Moulton (1914a) in March 1914 to Wallace’s son, gives any hint of such a relationship. No local contemporary newspaper article suggests such an inspiration. One would think that the direct associates of Charles Brooke, or even Charles Brooke himself, would have brought attention to “Wallace’s suggestion”.