

Explorer-Scientists in the Mist: Early Explorers in Sarawak and their Contribution to Science

by [Billy Corr](#) (March 2024)



Curious Plants from the Forest of Matang, Sarawak, Borneo, by Marianne North, 19th C

...they would pour in, in a continual stream, keeping me hard at work catching and pinning till past midnight...On good nights I was able to capture from a hundred to two hundred and fifty moths...
—Alfred Russel Wallace, on catching moths at Rajah James Brooke's bungalow on Bukit Peninjauh, thirty kilometres up the Sarawak

River from Kuching

The scientist-explorers of Sarawak during the heroic age of pioneering research were a fearless lot; they had to be. Romping off into unmapped and virtually trackless rain forests before the era of modern medical knowledge and antibiotic drugs, radio contact, and rescue helicopters took stamina and resolution.

None lost their lives but many came very close to crossing the Styx in their endeavours. Alfred Russel Wallace, a self-taught naturalist who initially trained as a surveyor, was frequently racked by debilitating fever, but continued collecting insects by the chestful in circumstances which would dismay even the most dedicated soul today. Wallace, posthumously commemorated by the eponymous line in the Macassar Straits separating the mammalian zone from that of the marsupials, was the first researcher to study the flora and fauna of Sarawak systematically. It was he who collected and named Wallace's flying frog, the gliding tree-frog of Borneo, and, with due deference and respect to his host, *Ornithoptera brookeana*, Rajah Brooke's birdwing butterfly, as well as recording the extraordinary way in which hornbills bring up their young: "The extraordinary habit of the male, in plastering up the female with her egg, and feeding her during the whole time of incubation, and till the young one is fledged, is common to several of the large hornbills, and is one of those strange facts in natural history which are 'stranger than fiction.'"

Wallace was Charles Darwin's contemporary and collaborator, but never achieved the latter's fame; it is Darwin, not Wallace, who is held in deep suspicion by the Creationists of Kaas and Darwin's portrait, not Wallace's, which adorns British banknotes.

Odoardo Beccari, a Florentine botanist and palm-specialist, seems to have classified and named most of the flora of South-

East Asia single-handedly. His expedition to Sarawak, that of 1865-8, became known to the English-reading public in 1904 in a translated edition of *Wanderings in the Great Forests of Borneo*, illustrated by photographs provided by Margaret, the first Raneë of Sarawak. He observed that "the uses of the nipa [palm] are innumerable, and from it are produced sugar, wine, vinegar and salt ... [of] the young white leaves bags are made, and mats called 'kajang', very serviceable for covering boats or making partitions in houses."

Charles Hose, the son of a provincial English clergyman, forsook his studies at Cambridge to accept a cadetship in the Sarawak service and become a dedicated servant of the Brooke government on the Baram and, later, the Rejang. He was an instinctive, essentially self-taught, practical scientist who was later awarded an honorary Doctor of Science degree from Cambridge, a pioneer ethnographer, naturalist, scientific researcher, a firm administrator ready and willing to despatch a posse to bring in the head of an acknowledged murderer, a subtle and adroit peacemaker and an explorer who justly deserves to have a mountain range, that between the Balleh and the Balui, bearing his name to this day. His splendid book, *Fifty years of Romance and Research in Borneo*, immodestly lists over two pages of new genera, species and sub-species which he collected and named over the years.

Hose was also a sympathetic and greatly gifted writer in the manner of the contributors to the contemporary Baedeker's *Guidebooks*; his description of the Iban is a delight to read and as true today as the day it was written: "... vain, dressy, boastful, excitable, not to say frivolous people: cheerful, talkative, sociable, fond of fun and jokes and lively stories; and, though prone to exaggeration, their statements can generally be accepted as founded on fact; they are industrious and energetic, and are great wanderers ... an agreeable companion and a useful citizen ... they have too little respect for their chiefs, a peculiarity which renders their social

organisation somewhat defective and chaotic; they are quarrelsome and litigious ... [and of] truculent disposition." Could any Dayak politician have expressed it better?

There is probably no better introduction to Sarawak, its people and its flora and fauna than a thorough perusal of Charles Hose's accessible work: "... I am convinced that the highlands of Sarawak will one day become a health resort for people from steamy and damp climates nearer the sea, who will find in its wonderful profusion of jungle, river and mountain scenery more opportunities for health and pleasure and a greater variety of natural beauty than can be obtained in a similar compass in any part of the world."

Of that truly Renaissance figure, Major Tom Harrisson, Curator of the Sarawak Museum and Government Ethnologist from 1947 to 1966, one is almost lost for words; it is truly astounding that a man who was frequently an obnoxious and bullying inebriate accomplished so much of lasting value. C. Hudson Southwell, the Australian missionary, was reliably told that Harrisson would compel reluctant Kelabit drinkers in the Highlands to join in the party fun by pushing their heads into jars of *borak*, the Bario equivalent of *tuak*.

Harrisson, a Cambridge dropout like Charles Hose, was interested in anything and everything Sarawakian; omen birds, vernacular architecture, local economies, tribal marital rites, penis piercing, ancient artifacts, stone carvings, the life cycles of marine turtles and much more, publishing vast quantities of excellent research, all very readable, if hardly easily accessible today. His *World Within* [1959, 1984] is a stunning and illuminating text. Resolutely assisted by his second wife, Barbara, with whom he did much to successfully promote the cause of the orangutang's survival in Sarawak, Harrisson excavated the Niah caves with the reckless and haphazard zeal of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy, unconscionably excluding truly qualified archaeologists from what remained essentially a private fiefdom so long as he was in command.

Yet it was the same boastful and insufferable Harrisson who tutored and groomed Benedict Sandin, later to be the foremost authority on Iban history and culture, as his successor, creating a special position for him at the Sarawak Museum. Harrisson accomplished much in Sarawak, revitalising the Sarawak Museum and reviving the *Sarawak Museum Journal*, simultaneously making so many bitter foes among the Kuching intelligentsia that he was declared *persona non grata* the moment it became politically possible to exclude him from Sarawak permanently.

We are obliged to Oxford University Press for making many classic texts readily accessible in cheap paperback editions. Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago*, Beccari's *Wanderings in the Great forests of Borneo*, Hose's *Natural Man*, *Fifty Years of Romance and Research in Borneo*, and *The Field-Book of a Jungle Wallah* as well as Tom Harrisson's *World Within* and *Borneo Jungles* are listed, as are many more. Few readers are likely to have the opportunity to seek out dusty files of the *Sarawak Museum Journal* and, sadly, both libraries and bookshops here are numbingly mediocre in their offerings beyond romantic novelettes and Enid Blyton.

In more recent years, the Earl of Cranbrook, whose splendidly evocative name suggests an East End public house frequented by the Kray brothers, has contributed much to our knowledge of the flora and fauna of Southeast Asia. His compilation, *Wonders of Nature in South-East Asia*, embraces Sarawak several times; one contribution is by a Lord Medway; there is also an *en passant* reference to one Gathorne Cranbrook. These three, Gathorne, the Lord and the Earl, are one and the same person, just as the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Cornwall and the Earl of Orkney are one.

A generation of Sarawak-born researchers is coming to maturity but distressingly little of their work is easy of access outside specialist libraries. The lavishly illustrated book *National Parks of Sarawak*, by Hans Hazebroek and Abang Kashim

bin Abang Morshidi, is an exception, but far too expensive for the casual purchaser at RM (Malaysian Ringgit) 150, despite being a production with over thirty sponsors. The book should be in every library in Sarawak; its photographs, text and bibliography are outstanding.

What of the natives of Sarawak in that distant era of discovery? From the earliest days, Charles Hose paid tribute to the superlative skills of the Iban who helped him collect and preserve specimens and to the unrivaled expertise of the Penan who knew the habits and habitat of every creature of the forest; the ascenders of mountains relied on the expert local knowledge of fearless and resolute rhinoceros-trackers.

It has taken many decades for a scientifically minded generation to emerge here in Sarawak but such accomplishments do not happen overnight. In the meantime, much has changed. Logging and logging roads have carried remorseless hunters with lights and shotguns deep into the once-impenetrable interior and now there are, quite simply, far fewer wild animals than before. It has been fifteen years since a wild rhino was seen in Sarawak and that lone critter was so close to the Kalimantan border that the brief sighting might as well have been a mirage.

The wildlife of Sarawak fights a stubborn rearguard action; pythons are apprehended and slain in suburban Kuching and crocodiles make unexpected appearances in waterlogged drains near main roads and housing developments. Every rural school in the Rejang basin has tales of python and eagle sightings and, on rare occasion, glimpses of crocodiles too. Those charged with enforcing the protection laws have a thankless task, but they persevere nonetheless. Enforcement of the laws is the worst, and crudest, way of changing public perceptions but it works. There are fewer live labi-labi and python chunks being openly traded and the market for such products will gradually fade.

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