

DOI: 10.1355/sj31-2k

*Of Whales and Dinosaurs: The Story of Singapore's Natural History Museum.* By Kevin Y.L. Tan. Singapore: NUS Press, 2015. xix+265 pp.

The opening of the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum in April 2015 marked the culmination of a long and turbulent journey for Singapore's natural history collection. Once the pride of the Raffles Museum and the core of a regional research hub, the collection was almost dismantled during the early years of Singapore's independence, remaining intact thanks only to the commitment of a handful of individuals. It is this intriguing tale that Kevin Y.L. Tan sets out to narrate in *Of Whales and Dinosaurs*, the publication of which coincided with the new museum's launch.

While other scholars — such as Gretchen Liu, in her well-known *One Hundred Years of the National Museum* (1987) — have investigated the history of the Raffles Museum and its successor institutions, this book is the most in-depth treatment of the natural history collection to date. Through ten chronological chapters, Tan follows the display and research collections from their beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century to the present, structuring the narrative around individuals who made significant contributions to their development. We therefore learn a great deal about the lives and achievements of the curators, directors and scientists whose careers intersected with the natural history collections — from Thomas Stamford Raffles to current museum head Peter Ng — and their efforts to build or preserve what Tan describes as “the closest thing Singapore has to a national treasure” (p. xix).

Tan condenses his account of the vicissitudes of the Raffles Museum's existence into the first half of the book, and devotes the second to the post-independence years. These latter chapters are particularly illuminating. Tan's meticulous research, comprising interviews and unprecedented access to archival material, reveals the full extent of the threats to the collection after its expulsion from the National Museum, and the toll taken by repeated moves among

successive inadequate storage facilities. We also learn of the struggles of the National University of Singapore's biologists, local nature enthusiasts and members of the international scientific community to protect this irreplaceable resource over many decades. Although the extensive descriptions of meetings, correspondence and official decisions are sometimes overwhelming, Tan impresses on the reader quite how astonishing the survival of the collection — and in such good condition — has been.

In his prologue, Peter Ng poses the question, “why a natural history museum?” (p. xii), and he and Tan make a compelling argument for the new museum's value for research and education. The book, however, includes little consideration of this question as it relates to the historical context of the museum. In the first two chapters, for example, the sources quoted reveal that the nascent Raffles Museum shifted its remit significantly, from an initial concentration on archaeology and ethnology to natural history, but the motivations behind these changes are not explored. Moreover, it is widely acknowledged among museum historians and historians of science that collecting and exhibiting played an important role in colonial societies, one intertwined with the exercise of “soft” colonial power. Existing research on natural history in Singapore by Timothy P. Barnard has characterized the Raffles Museum as a prominent symbol of British rule (Barnard 2013, p. 192). It functioned not only as a centre for research, but also as a public representation of the strength and prestige of the British Empire. It would have been valuable, then, for Tan to have dealt more explicitly with the relationship between colonialism and natural history. European colonialism undoubtedly shaped attitudes towards nature and science in Singapore and therefore has important implications for understanding the museum before 1965, as well as the fate of the natural history collections in the post-independence era. Any attempt to tell the story of the collections without addressing these issues is, arguably, incomplete.

Alongside the narrative, more than one hundred illustrations appear throughout the book. These enhance the volume immensely, but the fact that the text makes little reference to such a rich collection of visual sources seems something of a missed opportunity. Many of

the photographs show the museum buildings and galleries, providing fascinating glimpses into changing methods and agendas in research and display over the decades. In the text, meanwhile, the decision to foreground the biographies of significant actors means that less attention is given to the influence of wider museological and scientific trends on the collection over time, even as these influences emerge so evocatively from the visual sources presented in the book. Nonetheless, one hopes that the extensive source material compiled here might aid further analysis of the historical development of natural history collecting and exhibition in Singapore in the future.

*Of Whales and Dinosaurs* provides a solid introduction to Singapore's natural history collection, and to the island-state's often fraught relationship with its heritage and environment. Although some facets of the collection's story would have benefited from further exploration, the book makes an attractive and engaging companion to the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum.

#### REFERENCES

- Barnard, Timothy P. "The Raffles Museum and the Fate of Natural History in Singapore". In *Nature Contained: Environmental Histories of Singapore*, edited by Timothy P. Barnard. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013, pp. 184–211.
- , ed. *Nature Contained: Environmental Histories of Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013.
- Liu, Gretchen. *One Hundred Years of the National Museum: Singapore 1887–1987*. Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 1987.

#### **Jennifer R. Morris**

Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 11 Arts Link, AS1–05–27, Singapore 117570; email: jennifer.morris@u.nus.edu.

DOI: 10.1355/sj31-21

*For Better or For Worse: Marriage and Family in Sarawak*. Edited by Hew Cheng Sim. London: Whiting & Birch, 2015. x+218 pp.

The sociocultural diversity of Borneo offers a kaleidoscope of comparative research possibilities, and yet there is a surprising