

Editorial Foreword

The Singapore Bicentennial as public history

Sir Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles looms large in the historical consciousness of Singapore. To him is assigned the perspicacity to recognise the island's strategic location as a British station and the prescience to make it a free port. The 'European And Native Merchants of Singapore' declared inasmuch in their farewell address to Raffles on the occasion of his final departure from Singapore on 5 June 1823:

To your unwearied zeal, your vigilance, your comprehensive views, we owe at once the foundation and maintenance of a settlement unparalleled for the liberality of the principles on which it has been established; principle, the operation of which has converted, in a period short beyond all example, a haunt of pirates into the abode of enterprize (*sic*), security, and opulence.¹

Sir Frank Swettenham echoed much the same sentiments in his *British Malaya*, first published in 1906:

to him [Raffles] we owe the possession of Singapore, the Gate of the Farther East, a naval base of the highest importance, a great commercial centre, and the most prosperous of British Crown Colonies. Indirectly, the foresight which secured Singapore for the British Empire led to the extension of British influence throughout the States of the Malay Peninsula.²

In between these two eulogies was a public discussion among the mercantile community and the colonial government on how to memorialise Raffles. That public history, as it would be termed today,³ of commemorating Raffles, culminated in celebrations

1 Quoted in Lady Sophia Raffles, *Memoir of the life and public services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, repr. (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991 [1835]), p. 545. A copy of the address was sent to John Crawford to convey to Raffles. Sophia Raffles includes Raffles' fulsome acknowledgement of the speech (*ibid.*, p. 546).

2 Swettenham repeated his praise of Raffles and his establishment of a British presence on Singapore as the precursor to the expansion of British influence in Malaya (in which Swettenham himself played a significant role) in the reprints and revised edition of *British Malaya: An account of the origin and progress of British influence in Malaya* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948 [1907]), p. 72.

3 The distinction is between what Carl L. Becker termed Mr Everyman as a historian believes about his past as it is relevant to his present, and the academic historian working towards a Rankean *wie es eigentlich gewesen* reconstruction of the past (Becker, Annual Address, American Historical Association, 1931). Oversimplified, the genealogies of these two categories of thinking about the past run, for one, from Ranke to H. Butterfield and G.R. Elton (both Regius Professors of History at Cambridge); and for the other, from Nietzsche to Becker and Hayden White.

of the Centenary of Singapore. A Committee appointed by the colonial government to consider how best to commemorate the centenary recommended that 'there should be some permanent institution erected by public subscription, supplemented by Government aid, as a memorial of the Centenary'. The Committee reviewed eleven proposals for such an institution, ranging from an art gallery to a university, and recommended 'that the most memorial is a scheme which will provide for the advancement of the education of the Colony with a view to laying securely the foundations upon which a university may in course of time be established'. In making this recommendation, the Committee recalled Raffles' promotion of education for the locals.⁴ The outcome of this recommendation was the establishment of Raffles College in 1928, which today has become part of the genealogy of the National University of Singapore. The Centenary of Singapore was otherwise celebrated with a series of events starting with a parade in the morning and ending with fireworks in the evening. Part of the celebrations involved moving the statue of Raffles from the Padang to the forecourt of the Victoria Memorial Hall.

The ghost of Raffles was not exorcised with Singapore's decolonisation. He continued to permeate Singaporean social memories and historical consciousness, linking Singapore's colonial past to its decolonising present and post-colonial future. Then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew recalled United Nations economic adviser Albert Winsemius recommending in 1962 that he maintain the statue of Raffles, and not dispose of it as a colonial relic, because it symbolised all that Singapore stood for and survived on.⁵

Former deputy prime minister S. Rajaratnam went further. In his trademark purple prose, he declared in a 1984 speech that:

After attaining independence in 1965 there was debate as to who should be declared the founding fathers of Singapore. The debate was brought to an abrupt end when the government fixed responsibility for this on Sir Stamford Raffles and officially declared him the founder of Singapore.

Many of our Third World friends are completely mystified that contrary to usual practice a dyed-in-the-wool British imperialist should have been named the founder of modern Singapore. In fact there were some well-meaning patriots in Singapore who were all for casting the Raffles statue situated in front of Victoria Memorial Hall into what was then the revolting filthy and smelly Singapore River.

It was touch and go then whether Raffles ended in our improbable river. To cut a long story short there was a reprieve and Raffles was saved. [...]

Our decision to name Raffles the founder of Singapore is an example of the proper use of history; the proper approach to the preservation of monuments. [...] in

4 Gilbert E. Brooke, 'The Centenary Day and its celebrations', in *One hundred years of Singapore, Being some account of the capital of the Straits Settlements from its foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on the 6th February 1818 to the 6th February 1919*, ed. William Makpeace, Gilbert E. Brooke and Roland St J. Braddell, repr. (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991 [1919]), pp. 570–85.

5 Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2000), p. 67.

nominating Raffles as the founder of modern Singapore we are accepting a fact of history. To pretend otherwise is to falsify history.⁶

Raffles has had a more illustrious after-life in the 200 hundred years following his arrival at Singapore than in his short 46-year existence. He has today become a symbol of what Singapore is about. How then should the bicentennial of his arrival in Singapore be commemorated? That the colonial public history of *how* to memorialise Raffles continued into Singapore's post-colonial public history about *why* Raffles should continue to be memorialised meant that the bicentennial of Raffles' arrival could not be blanked out and conveniently forgotten. But Raffles and his arrival in Singapore could not be celebrated as an imperialist icon as he had been in 1919.

The public history of how the centenary of Raffles' arrival in Singapore was celebrated, however, was forgotten in 2017 (except among readers of the two-volume *One hundred years of Singapore*) when planning for the bicentennial started. There were more social memories of the sesquicentenary of Raffles' arrival among the 'Pioneer' generation of Singaporeans born after 1945. Some thought it mystifying and odd that a member of the British royalty was invited to be the guest of honour at the fourth National Day celebrations in 1965. But these memories do not form a coherent public history of why Princess Alexandra, a cousin of Queen Elizabeth II, was invited to represent the latter at Singapore's 1965 National Day celebrations. There is no public history of why Princess Alexandra was accorded the honour of ceremonially arriving at the City Hall site of the parade after the prime minister and before the president. It was also mystifying why the British anthem was played before the Singapore National Anthem.⁷

The Singapore Bicentennial Office, specifically set up to plan and implement the bicentennial, had therefore a fragmentary and contradictory public history of how to engage with, and build upon, the centenary and sesquicentenary of Raffles' arrival in Singapore.⁸ If the centenary celebrations were an exemplification of then public history perceptions of Raffles as a hero and great man of history, and the sesquicentenary of his arrival commemorated in conjunction with Singapore's National Day signified an intent to link emerging national identity with some form of remembrance of British rule, then how should the bicentennial be commemorated?

Singapore's approach to the bicentennial was outlined by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the launch of the Singapore Bicentennial on 28 January 2019 when he declared:

Today, we mark a significant anniversary in Singapore's history. Stamford Raffles did not 'discover' Singapore, any more than Christopher Columbus 'discovered' America. By the

6 Reprinted in Kwa Chong Guan, ed., *S. Rajaratnam on Singapore: From ideas to reality* (Singapore: World Scientific; Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2006), p. 252.

7 Ng Paul Seen has delved into the British archives for a reconstruction of the circumstances leading Lee Kuan Yew to invite Princess Alexandra to grace Singapore's fourth National Day in his 'Celebrating Singapore's 150th anniversary on its 4th National Day (9 August 1965)', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 92, 11 (2019): 57–78.

8 Minister Josephine Teo, co-chair of the Singapore Bicentennial Ministerial Steering Committee, admitted that trying to uncover what happened in 1969 and 1919 'turned out to be very difficult' because the material was sparse, incomplete and in 'bits and pieces here and there' (address at Singapore Bicentennial Appreciation Dinner, 22 Jan. 2020).

time Raffles arrived in 1819, Singapore had already had hundreds of years of history. In the 14th century, this area, at the mouth of the Singapore River, was a thriving seaport called Temasek. Around this period, according to the *Sejarah Melayu*, Sang Nila Utama founded a kingdom here and named it Singapura. When the Europeans came to Southeast Asia in the 16th and 17th centuries, they knew about the island of Singapore. Jacques de Coutre was a Flemish gem trader who knew the region well. Around 1630, two centuries before Stamford Raffles, de Coutre proposed to the King of Spain to build a fortress in Singapore, because of its strategic location. Had the King accepted de Coutre's proposal, Singapore might have become a Spanish colony, instead of a British one.

And it took another 200 years before Raffles landed at a spot near here, and persuaded the Sultan of Johor to allow the British East India Company to establish a trading post in Singapore. That was a crucial turning point in our history. It set this island on a trajectory leading to where we are today.⁹

Lee then outlined this historical trajectory which 'drove us to join Malaysia in 1963 ... but ... also made us quite different from our neighbours and friends'. Lee emphasised that the Bicentennial is

not just remembering Stamford Raffles or William Farquhar, though we should. We are tracing and reflecting upon our longer history, one that stretches back way before 1965. We are acknowledging and appreciating the broader context which shaped and created today's Singapore. This was our journey, from Singapore to Singaporean.

Raffles was in 1919 celebrated as an icon of an empire which had just emerged victorious from a Great War, and Singapore, as a jewel of that empire, could look forward to a bright future. In 2019 the focus, however, was on Raffles in the longer and broader context of our history 'which shaped and created today's Singapore'. This reframing of Raffles in the long cycles and broader regional context of Singapore's history was possible because archaeological excavations and archival research into early modern European records in the past 30 years has enabled a reconstruction of a history of Singapore before Raffles. Some of this evidence in maps, texts and artefacts for Early Singapore were collated in a 2004 National Museum publication.¹⁰ A 2009 text *Singapore; A 700-Year History; From Early Emporium to World City* by Tan Tai Yong, Derek Heng and the present writer provided the Singapore Bicentennial Office with a convenient summary of the emerging longer history of Singapore which could frame the Bicentennial, including the major immersive multimedia 'Bicentennial Experience' exhibition on Fort Canning, which drew some 760,000 visitors during its seven-month run from June to December 2019.¹¹

9 Prime Minister's Office Singapore, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-launch-of-the-Singapore-Bicentennial-Jan-2019> (accessed 10 Feb. 2020).

10 John N. Miksic and Cheryl-Ann Low Mei Gek, eds., *Early Singapore, 1300s–1819: Evidence in maps, text and artefacts* (Singapore: Singapore History Museum, 2004).

11 Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng and Tan Tai Yong's *Singapore: A 700-year history: From early emporium to world city* was commissioned and published by the National Archives of Singapore in 2009. It was based on the National University of Singapore History Department's module 'Evolution of a global city-state', taught by its three co-authors. The Bicentennial Office supported the three authors, with Peter Borschberg as a fourth co-author, to draft a new (rewritten) edition of their ten-year old text with the

Singapore's main museums curated major exhibitions and conferences on the Bicentennial. The Asian Civilisations Museum, in collaboration with the British Museum, presented an exhibition on 'Raffles in Southeast Asia: Revisiting the Scholar and Statesman', which attempted a rather nuanced presentation of Raffles as more than a 'most obedient & faithful humble servant' of the Hon. Company (as he signed off his official letters and reports), but also a scholar and statesman in his own right.¹² The National Museum's contribution to the Bicentennial was 'An Old New World: From the East Indies to the Founding of Singapore, 1600–1819', an exhibition which reflected on the broader forces at play in the 200 years which preceded and culminated in the establishment of the entrepôt in 1819.¹³ The National Library showcased its collection of historically significant paper records tracing the island's early development to its establishment as a Crown Colony in 1867.¹⁴

All of these exhibitions were in effect exercises in public history, attempting to shift the conventional and dominant public understanding that Singapore history began only with the arrival of Raffles. As an exercise in public history, the Bicentennial Office also had an extensive outreach programme to involve community centres, social clubs and creative arts groups, among others, to organise ground-up events to uncover stories of Singapore's past. These activities included two theatre productions by Ng Yi-sheng and by Alfian Sa'at and Neo Han Bin, respectively, investigating the marginalised voices of Singapore history.

The *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (JSEAS) and the NUS Department of History convened a workshop on 'Reassessing 1819 in Singapore History' on 1–2 March 2018 as its contribution to commemorating the Bicentennial. The essays in this special issue of JSEAS are the academic contribution to the public history discussion of Raffles and the bicentennial. Nine of the papers presented at the workshop are included in this volume.

As expected, Raffles' ghost haunted the workshop. Was Raffles a Thomas Carlye hero and sincere Great Man whose statue deserves to continue standing on its pedestal in front of the Victoria Memorial Hall, or a schemer for colonialism and a villain who should be brushed out of Singapore history?¹⁵ Timothy Barnard's essay reconstructs the process in which Raffles' name was progressively exalted to become a core element in the Victorian worldview of creating heroes to glorify the empire. 'Raffles Restitution' by Ng Yi-Sheng explores how he and his fellow playwrights, poets and other writers have ambivalently responded to 1819, arguing that he and

title *Seven hundred years: A history of Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Board; Marshall Cavendish, 2019). The Bicentennial Experience, <https://www.bicentennial.sg/the-bicentennial-experience/> (accessed 10 Feb. 2020).

12 See the exhibition catalogue: Stephen A. Murphy, Naomi Wang and Alexander Green, eds., *Raffles in Southeast Asia: Revisiting the scholar and statesman* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum; British Museum, 2019).

13 See the exhibition catalogue, Stephanie Yeo, ed., *An Old New World: From the East Indies to the founding of Singapore, 1600s–1819* (Singapore: National Museum 2019).

14 The catalogue of the exhibition, National Library Board (NLB), *On Paper: Singapore before 1867* (Singapore: NLB, 2019) showcases 28 of the most significant items in the exhibition.

15 The polymarble replica of the statue of Raffles on the bank of the Singapore River was in January 2019 painted over by artist Teng Kai Wei such that it appeared to have merged into the OUB Building in its background. The Bicentennial Office stated that it commissioned this work 'to arouse curiosity, maybe some reflection and ultimately, to spark conversations about our history'.

his fellow artists have chosen to retell 1819 not as a year of conquest, but as a polymorphous moment of transformative contact between East and West in which Singaporeans may view themselves not as victims of change, but its agents.¹⁶

Another ghost lurking in the corners of the workshop was that of colonialism and its legacy. Was colonialism all about exploitation, and if so, why are we commemorating 200 years of colonial exploitation of Singapore? Or, did British imperial rule for Singapore, as Rajaratnam ambiguously declared, have ‘both positive and negative aspects. It was both oppressive and liberationist’? Philip Holden’s essay examines how writers have incorporated these contradictory images of colonialism in their literary works to create new narratives which challenges academic historiography for a new narrative of Singaporean peoplehood.

Kelvin Lawrence attempts in his essay a new reading of Munshi Abdullah’s experience of empire, arguing that Abdullah was more a cultural intermediary in a cosmopolitan port-city than a critic of traditional Malay society, as he has usually been read. Singapore’s image as not only a commercial port-city, but an imperial hub as reflected in two ‘tours of the empire’ is examined by Donna Brunero in her contribution to the Workshop. As a group these three essays review and revise public history images of Singapore’s colonial past.

Three essays in this issue of *JSEAS* are substantial contributions to pushing public history awareness of Singapore’s pre-Raffles history, while a further essay by Jayati Bhattacharya increases awareness of the Indian business communities’ part in the growth of the port-city’s colonial trade. Derek Heng analyses what can be inferred about patterns of economic production, material consumption and cultural adoption and assimilation of international products brought into the port from the archaeological record. Peter Borschberg delves into the drafting of Article 12 of the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty in which the Dutch withdrew their objections to Raffles’ establishment of a British Station on Singapore and what they gained from this concession. The late Shah Alam Zaini’s contribution is his long-overdue analysis of what can be inferred from the archaeological record about metal production on issues of power and social control over resources and labour in fourteenth-century Temasek.¹⁷

Although not labelled as such, the Singapore Bicentennial was in effect a massive exercise in public history which reached out to engage Singaporeans to review and rethink a foundational event in their national history.¹⁸ The workshop convened by *JSEAS* and the NUS Department of History, which this volume is a product of, brought together academic historians, archivists, archaeologists, museum curators,

16 Ng was one of the three creators of ‘Ayer Hitam: A black history of Singapore’, a lecture-performance exploring the history and influence of the African diaspora in Singapore, staged in January 2018 as a Bicentennial event.

17 Shah Alam Zaini was a pioneer volunteer in the archaeological excavations at Fort Canning in the 1980s before being recruited to join the curatorial staff of the former Singapore History Museum. He went on to do graduate work in archaeology at the University of Michigan and doctoral studies at the University of Hawai‘i on Pyu archaeology. With his sudden and unexpected passing in 2019, Shah Alam will be missed, as much more was expected of him.

18 As it is being practised globally: see for example, Paul Ashton and Alex Trapeznik, eds., *What is public history globally? Working with the past in the present* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), or James B. Gardner and Paul Hamilton, eds., *Oxford handbook of public history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

librarians, cultural theorists and playwrights to discuss the emerging contested public history narratives about Raffles and his role. The legacy of that exercise, as Minister Josephine Teo, as co-chair of the Singapore Bicentennial Ministerial Steering Committee, summed up in her address to the Bicentennial's Appreciation Dinner on 22 January 2020 was first, the new materials and stories uncovered about Singapore's past; and second, the immersive and interactive techniques developed to tell these stories. Third, and most important, was an enhanced *awareness* of Singapore having a much longer seven-hundred-year history; an *appreciation* of the spirit and values that define the nation-state and its peoples today; and renewed *aspiration* for its future.

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