

A MALAYAN TREASURE:

The Gibson-Hill Collection

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Dr Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill
Courtesy of the family of P.S. Teo

*Was this the light,
this little candle at noon?*

– Laurence Binyon, *Idols*

(Cited in Gibson-Hill (1947, December), "Notes on the Cocos-Keeling Islands." *JMBRAS*, 20(2), pp. 140)

DR CARL ALEXANDER GIBSON-HILL (23 October 1911 – 18 August 1963) was the last expatriate director of the Raffles Museum. His work in Singapore straddled the period between World War II and Singapore's independence, when British defeat at the hands of the Japanese and the rise of nationalism reshaped the landscape of Malayan politics and history. The collection he acquired thus reflects both the heritage of English adventure and colonialism in the East as well as narratives of Malaysians seeking to define their own history. The collection also facilitated his work as curator and editor in two esteemed institutions – the Raffles Museum and the Asiatic Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. On 18 June 1965, the Gibson-Hill Collection was donated to the National Library through the Loke family, owners of a cinema chain. Today, the Gibson-Hill Collection is an important component in the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library.

Imprisoned Yet Free

A trained medical doctor, Gibson-Hill was an avid naturalist since childhood. He won awards for entomology at school

Dr Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill (b.23 October 1911, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England – d.18 August 1963, Singapore)

Education

- Pembroke College, Cambridge: B.A., 1933
- King's College Hospital Medical School: M.R.C.S., L. R. C. P., 1936

Medical Appointments

- Medical Officer, Christmas Island: 1938–1940
- Medical Officer, Cocos-Keeling Islands: 1941
- Health Officer, Rural Areas, Singapore Island: 1941–1942
- Health Officer, Oil tanker: March, 1946
- Acting Professor of Biology, College of Medicine: 12 July 1948 – 21 June 1950

Raffles Museum

- Assistant Curator: 1942
- Internee, Singapore: 1942–1945
- Assistant Curator of Zoology: 1947–1948
- Curator of Zoology: 1949–1956
- Director: 1957–1963

Malayan Branch, Royal Asiatic Society

- Member: 1940
- Asst. Hon. Secretary & Treasurer: 1947–1948
- Hon. Secretary: 1950–1955
- Hon. Editor: 1948–1961
- President: 1956–1961

Other Appointments

- Member, Royal College of Surgeons and Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians: 1936
- Malayan representative, Colonial Insecticides Committee: 1949
- Member, Committee of the Malayan Nature Society: 1950
- Permanent member, Standing Committee on Distribution of Terrestrial Faunas in the Inner Pacific: 1950
- Member, International Committee, International Ornithological Congress
- Corresponding Fellow, American Ornithologists' Union: 1951
- Vice-President, Singapore Camera Club: 1952
- President, Singapore Photographic Society: 1953
- Chairman, Singapore Arts Society: 1949–1953

This article has extracts from the Gibson-Hill Catalogue which is expected to be published by the end of 2008.

and was a keen photographer and illustrator of animal life since his teenaged years. Gibson-Hill served almost three years as the resident medical doctor at Christmas Island and the Cocos-Keelings Islands. Meanwhile Frederick N. Chasen, the then curator of the Raffles Museum, and an ornithologist himself had tasked Gibson-Hill to build up the Museum's bird specimen collection. Today, Gibson-Hill's Christmas Island birds, labelled in his own hand, are found at the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research.

Gibson-Hill arrived in Singapore on 12 December 1941, just weeks prior to Singapore's fall to the Japanese. He was hastily appointed curator in the absence of his predecessor and within a few days was interned at Changi and Sime Road Camp. But Gibson-Hill did not stop his academic pursuits. He took notes and drew sketches of local birds he observed at the camp. This resulted in several articles on local birds, including the Malayan Long-tailed Tailor-Bird (Gibson-Hill, 1950, December: 82 – 97) and the Spotted Munia (Gibson-Hill, 1950, December: 82: 98 - 113), with his illustrations added to an in-house publication by G. C. Madoc entitled *Malayan Birds* (Madoc, 1942, 1947). Whilst at the camp, he also mentally reworked his manuscript on the Cocos-Keelings Islands. Unfortunately whatever was left of the original draft on the Cocos-Keelings Islands was found as wrapping paper and mere loose scraps, a loss which Gibson-Hill lamented in his introduction to his article on the Ross' documents (Gibson-Hill, 1952, *JMBRAS*, 1 - 306).

Bird Life

Gibson-Hill took off for South Georgia (in Antarctica) almost immediately after his release from internment to study the birdlife there. The voyage, sponsored by the Falkland Island Museum, resulted in several minor articles and interesting additions to his book collection. Of the several books in his collection which reflects this voyage, one stands out – *Logbook for Grace* (1947) by Robert Cushman Murphy. Murphy, an established ornithologist in the 1940s, was newly married when he set off on his journey to South Georgia in 1912. The book is a compilation of Murphy's private letters to his young bride, Grace. The story seemed to parallel Gibson-Hill's who was separated from his wife during his years in internment, but even so left for further adventure before rejoining her in Britain. Whilst on leave in Britain, he worked on his earlier publications *British Sea Birds* (1947) and *Birds of the Coast* (1948)¹. Reviewers considered them

good overviews of British coastal birds and valued the accompanying photographs and illustrations done in Gibson-Hill's own hand. Gibson-Hill thus established his reputation as an amateur ornithologist during a time when bird-watching became increasingly popular in Europe.

Upon his return to Singapore in 1947, he was appointed Assistant Curator of Zoology. Here Gibson-Hill continued his bird studies – this time of local birds - and soon published "Birds of Malaya" (Gibson-Hill, 1949, *Bull. Raff. Mus.* (20), 5 – 299) which built on the listings of his predecessors and the specimen collection found in Singapore's Museum. The Gibson-Hill Collection invariably has a rich collection of titles on birds both locally as well as from the various continents. These include the standard handlists, checklists and manuals of birds namely of Thailand, Ceylon, Australia, New Zealand, Malaya, Singapore, UK and the Americas. More importantly, they include titles with finely illustrated drawings of birds. One example is Sutter's *Paradiesvogel und Kolibris* [Birds of Paradise and Humming Birds] (1953). There are 60 mounted full-page plates of these magnificent tropical birds in brilliant colour, illustrated by the famed Swiss artist Walter Linsenmaier showing them in shimmering plumage, perched proudly or in flight. Gibson-Hill also collected photographic works of the leading bird photographers of his day. These included works such as Hosking's *Masterpieces of bird photography* (1947) and his *Birds in action* (1949). However, it is Aymar's *Bird flight* (1936) that is recognised as the first publication to study bird flight through photographs and which, evolved new theories of bird flight itself. The copy in the Collection was a gift from Gibson-Hill's parents and was signed "Best wishes from mother and father, J. R. J. Gibson-Hill".

Many of the other titles on birds in his collection are similarly signed by friends and family showing Gibson-Hill's intimate relations with fellow birders. His brother-in-law, Bruce Campbell, a well-known naturalist in England, signed off the publication he authored - *Finding nests* (1953) with the simple phrase "To Carl Gibson-Hill with best wishes Bruce Campbell". Similarly, fellow birder and cinema magnate Loke Wan Tho signed off *A company of birds* (1957) with "To Carl with best wishes Wan Tho March 1958". The book is a compilation of photographs of birds from Loke's expeditions to India, New Guinea and within Malaya. The penned phrase is the only evidence in the Collection of the friendship that bound the men and would later lead to the donation of the Collection to the Library.



Head of an Adult Osprey drawn by C. A. Gibson-Hill from Madoc's *Malayan Birds* (1947)

Of Boats and Ships

Besides taking charge of the bird specimens, Gibson-Hill was tasked to set up the Boat Room. This involved studies of local boats ranging from Malay *prahus* and *sampans* to Chinese *tongkangs* and Indian *dhow*s. Being a proficient sailor himself, Gibson-Hill took to the task with fervour and passion as seen in his collection



Dr Carl Gibson-Hill (seated left) and Dato Loke Wan Tho (seated centre) at a Singapore Photographic Society exhibition event

of titles on Asian boats and the *Sea Pilots* published by the British Hydrographic Department. His many articles in the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)* concerning local boats makes him the authority on this subject even today. One of Gibson-Hill's earliest articles on boats is entitled "Boats and fishing on the Cocos-Keelings Islands", published in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (1946). He often took photographs of these water crafts to serve as a template for his illustrations. Although many of these published sketches were of unmanned boats, his photographs did capture the vibrant life of the boatmen and their fishing craft. They caught the sinewy, tanned bodies of Malay fishermen fluidly casting nets against the rising sun or boys playing in the waters whilst their fathers fished. Fluent in Malay, Gibson-Hill did not merely observe these sailing craft from a distance but had befriended these boatmen who would then take him up rivers and coasts to various locations to study birds and the islands.

The Gibson-Hill Collection comprises books on boat models as well as studies of Asian boats. Mitman's *Catalogue of the watercraft collection in the United States* (1929) gives details of this collection which today is known as the Smithsonian, and includes mention of local boats such as the Malay *prahu* and Chinese *junk*. Selected ship models are photographed and accompanied by a detailed description of the craft. The titles on Asian boats, include Hornell's books which describe Indian crafts (Hornell, 1920, 1924) and Waters which examines Chinese junks (1940).

The Gibson-Hill Collection, however, has a larger number of books on ships of European and American origins namely clipper ships, sailing ships, carracks and brigs. These include the works of Herbert Warington Smyth such as *Mast and sail in Europe and Asia* (1906) and Chatterton's *The old East Indiamen* (1914). Other books on sailing histories, such as the Andersons' *The sailing ship* (1926) and Chatterton's *Sailing ships* (1909), trace shipbuilding history from ancient times until the 20th century. The history of sailing is also described through the histories of shipping companies such as Ewart's *A hundred year history of the P & O Peninsular*

and *Oriental Steam Navigation Company* (1937) and MacGregor's (1961) account of Killick Martin & Co. A number of the titles, illustrated by skilled artists, are primarily a visual survey of classic ships touching even on the art of painting ships. Chatterton's *Old sea paintings* (1928), for instance, studies the life and works of Dutch and English painters of sailing ships

between the 14th and 19th centuries. Moses' *Sketches of shipping* (1824) has etchings of port life at Portsmouth Harbour in 19th century England and it is believed that few copies of this work are extant.

Of Travels and Voyages

Closely associated with sailing history are the travelogues and historical trade journeys made during the Age of Discovery, and these comprise the bulk of the Gibson-Hill Collection. Almost a third of the Collection is related to these travel tales and it is dominated by the Hakluyt Society's publications. Formed in 1846, the Hakluyt Society sought to advance knowledge of world history through the publication of travel narratives previously unavailable in English. Its namesake, Richard Hakluyt, gained fame as a compiler of tales. Although he seldom ventured far himself, Hakluyt's works captured the English imagination for travel and discovery. The Gibson-Hill Collection has 53 of 121 titles published by the Hakluyt Society between 1847 and 1963. The earliest Hakluyt title in the Collection is Walter Raleigh's *The discovery of the large, rich, and beautiful empire of Guiana* published in 1848, (number 3 of the Hakluyt's Society's works) while the latest is Bourne's and Taylor's *A regiment for the sea* (1963) (number 121), published in the year of Gibson-Hill's death.

The Collection has the first edition of Linschoten's *Discourse of voyages* (1598) published in English, the earliest title in the Collection. This is famed for unveiling the secret route Eastward, once privy only to the Portuguese. The knowledge was gleaned through Linschoten's privileged appointment as Secretary to the Portuguese Archbishop of Goa. With his publication, the gates to the East were opened for other European colonialists and inspired early cartographers to draft new maps of the journey to the East. This publication also facilitated Gibson-Hill's study on the Singapore Straits².

The Collection also includes some of the earliest stories of journeying. Several are compilations of tales such as the early 18th century compilation of travel narratives by Harris *Navigantium atque itinerantium bibliotheca* (1705)

and Hakluyt's own *Principal navigations* (1907, 1927) which was first published in 1598 with key works of the Age of Discovery. There are a number of accounts of Middle Easterners visiting Asia such as Ibn Batuta's *Travels in Asia* (1929) written originally in the 14th century, and another by Abū Zayd Hasan – *Ancient accounts of India and China* (1733) of the 9th century voyages of Sulaiman the Merchant (851 A. D.), and Ibn Walib (877 A. D.) to China. The journeys of the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British into the Far East capture the charm and courage of the Age of Discovery, and include such classics as *The world encompassed by Sir Francis Drake* (1854), *Three voyages of Vasco da Gama* (1869) and Magellan's *First voyage round the world* (1874). Interspersed are the sojourns of individuals such as Pietro della Valle's through India towards the Holy City in the Middle East in the 17th century, and Charles R. Boxer's translations of Brito's tales of Portuguese shipwrecks and sea disasters of the mid-16th to mid-17th centuries.

Many titles describe unusual exploits such as Fortune disguising himself to uncover the secrets of tea planting in China leading to India's rise in the tea industry and the end of China's monopoly³. Others are the diaries of early travellers and tourists, including some unusual Victorian women. The latter category includes Isabella Bird who is well-known for her famed work *The Golden Chersonese* (1883) and Annie A. Brassey who travelled on the Sunbeam with her whole family, pugs and all.

Accounts of Early Malaya

The early accounts and pre-colonial studies of Malaya lend the Gibson-Hill collection its value. Wheatley's classic *The Golden Chersonese* (1955) highlights the earliest mention of Malaya from Ptolemy's first century work, to early Chinese records and 7th century Arab travelogues. Another is Groeneveldt's *Historical notes on Indonesia and Malaya compiled from Chinese sources* (1960) which presents 14th to 17th century accounts. Complementing these are Shellabear's *Sejarah Melayu* (1948, 1957), a translation of the early history of Malaya as conveyed orally to the community, Tome Pires' *The Suma Oriental* (1944) which gives one of the earliest published descriptions of Malacca in the 16th century and Skelton's *Explorers' maps* (1954) which conveys the Age of Discovery through maps.

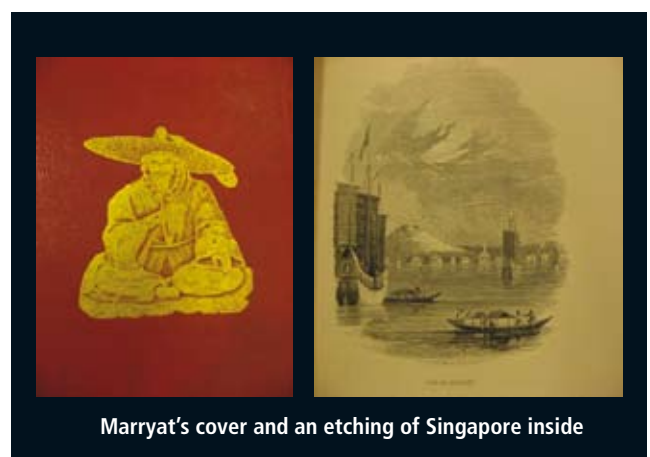
The colonial rivalry over the Spice Islands is reflected in several compilations of travel tales to the East. Besides Linschoten's, there is Purchas' *Pilgrimage* (1613) which brings together the works of more than a thousand authors, some of whom traversed the Far East. The Churchills' six-volume 18th century work *A collection of voyages and travels* (1732) is impressive not only for its accounts of Asia

in the 17th century but also for its illustrations and maps.

Most outstanding is Marryat's *Borneo and the Indian Archipelago* (1848). Marryat was both a surveyor and a skilled draughtsman who illustrated more than just maps. Whilst on Edward Belcher's tour of the Indian Archipelago between 1843 and 1846, he sketched the culture, costumes and scenery of the lands they visited. The book has vivid colour images of the region, including Singapore, as well as black-and-white details brought out through artfully placed light and shade. The copy in the Gibson-Hill Collection is one of the few that still has its original red binding with a gold Mandarin stamped on its cover.

Early British explorations and the study of the Malay archipelagos are invariably part of Gibson-Hill's Collection. These include the works on Francis Light⁴, those by⁵ and on⁶ Raffles and those by his contemporary, John Crawfur⁷. Aside from the works of the founding leaders, a number are surveys by naturalists like Forbes' *A naturalist's wanderings* (1885), or employees of the British East Indies like Marsden who provided the epic *The history of Sumatra* (1811). The Collection also includes the journeying of other nationalities in the region such as Horsfield, the first American to survey Java's natural heritage in *Zoological researches in Java* (1824) and Honig and Verdoorn's (1945) collection of scientific articles (translated from Dutch) of research in Indonesia. There is even an account of the escape to Java from religious persecution by a Frenchman (Le Guat, 1708)⁸ with descriptions of natural life observed during the harrowing journey. References of Singapore during its fledgling days as a British colony are also made in the works of Moor (1837)⁹,

Davidson (1846)¹⁰ who describe the settlement between 1826 to 1840s, Keppel (1856)¹¹ in his autobiographical accounts of his visits to Sarawak, passing through Singapore, Robertson's *Straits memories* (1910) giving an account of Singapore's community in the late 19th century, and Read's graphic *Play and politics* (1901).



Marryat's cover and an etching of Singapore inside

Erudite Editor

Gibson-Hill left an indelible mark as the Editor of the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Since the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society had established itself in the grounds of the Raffles Library and Museum in 1878, a succession of Directors had held a concurrent role as President of the Society's Branch. During Gibson-Hill's term, the position of editor was made separate from that of Honorary Secretary freeing him to focus on the task of editing the *Journal*. Erudite and particular to a fault, Gibson-Hill was known to add lengthy footnotes, bibliographies and maps to articles, clearly enhancing the original work. However, his diligence invariably delayed the publication of these articles, often to the annoyance of many.

One of his earliest tasks as editor was to compile the *Journal's* first post-war index – *the Index of Volumes 1–20* (1922–1947). The index was instrumental in raising the sales of the *Journal's* back issues and helped generate a tidy sum for the newly reinstated Society Branch. Aside from editing, Gibson-Hill also wrote extensively for the *Journal* and became the third most prolific contributor, with a total of 49 articles on various topics from the history of the region to boats and hats.¹² His work showed a deep knowledge of Malaya, its culture, ethnology and natural history. More importantly, they exemplified his willingness and dogged determination in helping ferret out difficult-to-find information. For example, his detailed history of a local newspaper – *The Singapore Chronicles*¹³, and a listing of Master Attendants¹⁴ who served in Singapore between 1819 and 1867 were responses to requests for more facts on these little researched areas¹⁵. Gibson-Hill had an innate ability to translate dry facts into living stories and transform seemingly meaningless lists, complex legislation and bureaucratic reports into gems of information and knowledge. He was also an active contributor to the *Malayan Nature Journal* and the *Bulletin of the Raffles Museum*, with whole editions dedicated to his articles. His works also appeared in the local daily, *The Straits Times*, specialised journals such as *Ibis* as well as in general titles such as *The Geographical Magazine* (London).

Articulating a New Malayan History

During the 1950s, the rumblings for Merdeka (Independence) swept through the Peninsula. It was expressed not only in politics but also institutionally. During this period, Malayan Studies was set up at the University of Malaya and Professor Cyril Northcote Parkinson was installed as the Professor of History. With Parkinson's encouragement, new



Walker's Voyages and cruises (1928) are bound in Gibson-Hill's unique batik covers

studies into Malayan history by Asians were initiated and textbooks by Malaysians for Malaysians were published.

The Gibson-Hill Collection is a testament to Parkinson's influence in this field. It has four titles from the *Background to Malaya Series*¹⁶ (a series credited to Parkinson) which provide bite-sized insights on Malaya's economy, politics and history. Besides several of Parkinson's titles such as *A short history of Malaya* (1956) and *War in the Eastern Seas 1793–1815* (1954), the Collection also has

several textbooks and readers on Malaya's history. These include Moorhead's *A history of Malaya and her neighbours* (1957) as well as rare history textbooks for Malaysians by Malaysians, such as Radhava's *History in the Malayan Primary School* (1960) and Morris' *A history of Malaya for schools* (1955). Alongside these are the popular readers such as Pearson's *People of early Singapore* (1955) and *A history of Singapore* (1956).

Many of these works were outcomes of fervent discussions in academic circles on Malayan history and identity during the 1950s, even as Malayan politicians were calling for independence. Capturing some of this fervency is Bastin's *The study of modern Southeast Asian history* (1959) which analyses the various interpretations of a Malayan history, evaluates Western perspectives and encourages further articulation of a truly Malayan history. Gibson-Hill after all was often at the heart of these debates, having to attend to the enquiries of many of these budding historians, as evidenced by their acknowledgements of him in their books.

A Vision of Malayan Culture

Even social institutions were being transformed by this search for a Malayan identity. In the 1950s, the Singapore Photographic Society (originally known as the Singapore Camera Club) and the Singapore Arts Society conveyed the visual expression of being Malayan. Gibson-Hill and Loke Wan Tho were active in both societies often alternating as Chairman or President and attracting important names to the exhibitions which they coordinated. Thus, copies of these societies' journals such as *The Singapore Artist* as well as their respective exhibition catalogues¹⁷ are found in the Collection.

The Gibson-Hill Collection has titles in Loke Wan Tho's name, inter-shelved retrospectively after the donation was made. Many of Loke's titles are related to photography – its techniques, craftsmanship and development, including those from the giants of photography such as Ansel Adam¹⁸ and William Mortensen.¹⁹ It was after all photography of

their first loves – the birds of Malaya – that drew Gibson-Hill and Loke together. Both produced photographs of birds which were so highly regarded that their respective photographs of the tern for example were independently chosen as symbols for the local currency and postage stamps – Gibson-Hill’s image of the black-naped tern *Sterna sumatrana* appears on Singapore’s 1966 15-cent stamp, while Loke’s image of the Black-naped Tern on Squence Rock off Changi appears on the 1971 issue of the Singapore dollar.

In spite of his severe short-sightedness, Gibson-Hill’s photographs and techniques were highly commended. Gibson-Hill had published several photographic works of Singapore and Malaya. The first entitled *Singapore; twenty-four camera studies* (1948) features the island’s built landscape in stark black-and-white. This was followed quickly by *The Malayan landscape; seventy camera studies* (1949) which portrayed the quiet idyllic life of Malaysians in nine states, reflecting both urban and rural perspectives. In Hancock’s *Architecture in Singapore* (1954), Gibson-Hill details the colonial buildings and landmarks in Singapore through both images and text. The photographs were part of an extensive exhibition of Singapore’s landmark buildings. Gibson-Hill’s photographs²⁰ of the 1950s remain vital images of Singapore’s history as they capture structures, many of which have been demolished or changed over time.

The bush jacket he frequently wore was often packed with lenses, films and notebooks, the last filled with details of his photographs. He was also known to, at the spur of the moment, jump into his station wagon and take off on expeditions. His secretary Eileen Lee remembers²¹ that these included pit stops at the Kallang River to barter for hats from Indonesian boatmen while at the same time studying their unique watercrafts. Sometimes the expeditions went further afield to the Johore River for archaeological digs or to take photographs of ancient monuments. Often, Lee would assist him on these journeys, holding on to his trusted Nikon.

The photographs taken were sometimes used for Gibson-Hill’s illustrations. These sketches were generally in pen and ink but sometimes drawn to life-size proportions. The works were scientific representations rather than artistic pieces. He illustrated almost all his articles, drawing birds, animals, boats, maps and artefacts. His interest in illustrations is reflected in his Collection of books, for instance in the beautiful works by animal artists such as Tunnicliffe²². His eye for art and imagery along with his scholarly bent naturally led him to organise the rich



The only book plate of Gibson-Hill found in the title *Practical taxidermy* (1922) by Montagu Brown

collection of historical paintings and prints in the Raffles Museum. He was credited in Teo, Chong & Oh’s publication *Nineteenth century prints of Singapore* (1987) for tracing the provenance and topographical details of these early artwork of Singapore.

A Quiet Escape

The mid-1950s saw Gibson-Hill’s health deteriorate. A diabetic, he did little to manage his health and remained a heavy smoker. Since 1956, he suffered bouts of oedema and was hospitalised in October 1959 for close to three months, and again at the end of 1960. In 1956, Tweedie’s announcement of his forthcoming retirement the following

year meant that Gibson-Hill had to fill his shoes as Director of the National Museum. For the same reason Gibson-Hill was also made President of the Society’s Branch but with the challenges of a dwindling membership, and Gibson-Hill holding all the key posts in the Society in addition to his duties as Director of the Museum, something had to give.

Meanwhile, the political and social landscape of Malaya was rapidly changing. With the formation of Malaysia slated for September 1963, an exodus of British expatriates soon followed. Eric Alfred observed²³ that many came personally to bid farewell to the Museum Director, whether they knew him personally or not, almost as a final pilgrimage before they left the country they loved so much. What could Gibson-Hill have felt in the face of these farewells?

For the first time, in 1962, the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society held its meeting in Kuala Lumpur (instead of Singapore) where Tun Abdul Razak was elected as its President. By now, Gibson-Hill would have realised that these changes foreshadowed what would invariably befall the Museum management. With the rise of nationalism and the drive to place locals in senior government positions, Gibson-Hill’s days as an expatriate Director of the Raffles Museum were numbered. Lee recalls²⁴ that Gibson-Hill had been depressed particularly since his term as Director of the National Museum was not renewed and his time in Malaya was drawing to a close. Some suggest that his good friend and fellow ornithologist, Loke had offered Gibson-Hill lodgings in the Cathay building apartments to continue his study of Malaya upon his retirement from the Museum.

This was not to be. Less than a month to his retirement, Gibson-Hill was found dead in his home in August 1963, alone. Whether his death was due to ill health or depression, rumours remain. What is certain is that he left behind an invaluable body of work in the form of texts and images, and an irreplaceable vacuum of knowledge on Malaya.

The Donation of a Treasured Collection

Unfortunately, within weeks of his death, the merger of Singapore with Malaysia was announced, and two years later its separation would follow. Because of the subsequent political transition and institutional reorganisation, it would only be in 1965 that the Asian Branch of the Asiatic Society would remember Gibson-Hill in its *Journal*. At the same time the donation of his treasured collection was made.

Loke Wan Tho had been the first director of the National Library Board²⁵. Established in 1960, the Board was instrumental in giving advisory support to the newly instituted National Library. One of the key collections established was the Southeast Asia Room which included the heritage collections of the Raffles Library and the Tan Yeok Seong's collection on the Nanyang Chinese. It is believed that Loke had seen the potential in Gibson-Hill's collection. Loke's plans had been to purchase his late friend's books and donate it to the National Library. Unfortunately, an air crash on 20 June 1964 over Taiwan led to Loke's demise. It was Loke's mother, Mrs Loke Yew who offered the donation on her son's behalf on 18 June 1965, almost a year after Loke's death.

The collection comprises close to 1,000 items, with more than 600 titles which are not duplicated²⁶ and 80% of these not found elsewhere in the National Library Board's holdings²⁷. Accompanying this collection are at least 25 titles contributed by Loke. Unfortunately, no manuscript, photograph or illustration of Gibson-Hill's was found amongst this set of published works. Upon receipt of the donation, each title was marked with a label ascribing the donation to Loke Wan Tho. The books are otherwise untouched, with scarcely a scribbled note or a dog-eared page. Selected titles however, have scrawled within them, Gibson-Hill's signature and a date. Using this marking, the acquisition of some of his titles can be traced. For example his earliest acquisitions in the 1940s were primarily of birds whilst his later acquisitions diversified to ethnological studies and travel literature. However, only 45 of such titles were marked. Only one title has his personal bookplate which depicts a Peregrine in flight above a unicorn.

Today, the books are located in the Closed Stacks of Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library. They can be accessed directly from the counter (at Level 11) or, for its titles which are considered Rare Books, accessed through its surrogates on microfilm. By the end of 2008, a catalogue of his works, with a brief analysis of selected titles and appended with his biography, will be published to assist in



Gibson-Hill's signature and dating found on specific titles

further exploration of this fine treasure-trove of Malayan heritage.

ENDNOTES

- Gibson-Hill published an earlier work *Warwickshire* (1936) describing the landscape of his hometown. However he published it under a pseudonym John Lisle.
- Gibson-Hill, Carl Alexander. (1956). *Singapore: Old Strait & New Harbour, 1300–1870*. Singapore: General Post Office.
- The story is found in Fortune *A Journey to the Tea Countries of China* (1852).
- Clodd, Harold Parker. (1948). *Malaya's first British pioneer: The Life of Francis Light*. London: Luzac.
- Such as Raffles' *History of Java* (1830).
- Sophia Raffles' *Memoir of the life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles* (1830).
- Namely Crawford's *History of the Indian archipelago* (1820) and his *A descriptive dictionary of the Indian Islands & adjacent countries* (1856).
- Le Guat, Francois (Leguat, Francis). (1708). *A new voyage to the East-Indies and his companions. Containing their adventures in two desert islands, and an account of the most remarkable things in Maurice Island, Batavia, at the Cape of Good Hope, the island of St. Helena, and other places on their way to and from the desert isles*. London: R. Bonwick, W. Freeman and Tim Goodwin.
- Moor, J. H. (1837). *Notices of the Indian archipelago, and adjacent countries: being a collection of papers relating to Borneo, Celebes, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Nias, the Philippine islands, Sulus, Siam, Cochin China, Malayan Peninsula, etc.* Singapore: [n. p.].
- Davidson, G. F. (1846). *Trade and travel in the Far East, or, Recollections of twenty-one years passed in Java, Singapore, Australia and China*. London: Madden & Malcolm.
- Especially in Keppel, Henry. (1853). *A visit to the Indian Archipelago, in H.M. ship Maeander; with portions of the private journal of Sir James Brooke*. London: Richard Bentley.
- Tiew, Wai Sin. (1998, July), History of Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS) 1878 – 1997: An overview. *Malaysian Journal of Library & Information Science*, 3(1), p. 50.
- JMBRAS (1953), 26(1), pp. 175–199.
- JMBRAS (1960), 33(1), pp. 1–64.
- Gibson-Hill's indicates that "(t)he difficulty experienced in dealing with what should have been a small problem showed clearly that no previous investigation into the matter had ever been recored, and that there was no extant official list (Gibson-Hill, "The Master Attendants (Harbour Masters) at Singapore, 1819-67", (1960), *JMBRAS*, 33(1), 1)".
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25. The Board was then a non-executive body with an advisory role, unlike the current Board formed in 1995, serving as the umbrella body housing both the National Library and the Public Libraries.
26. About a third of the titles in the holdings are duplicates with several copies of the same found within the Collection. The final catalogue thus lists only 673 individual titles integrating both duplicates and multi-volumed works.
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