



Publication: TODAY

Date: Oct 8 2007

Headline: It's Farquhar vs Raffles

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NATIONAL TREASURE: The collection of natural history drawings commissioned 200 years ago by William Farquhar (below) is the biggest of its kind from the period.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

IT'S FARQUHAR VS RAFFLES

The rivalry between Singapore's founding fathers rages to this day, witnessed by **MAYO MARTIN** at the National Museum

IT'S A tale full of petty rivalries, intrigue, ruthless ambition and missed chances to rival any period melodrama on TV. And it all takes place inside a museum.

That's how Iskander Mydin, senior curator of the National Museum, describes *Empire of Nature*, an ongoing exhibit of natural history drawings that date back almost 200 years.

At the centre of it all is the man who commissioned the drawings: William Farquhar, the first Resident and Commandant of Malacca, and later on, of Singapore.

That man, Mydin said, was not a mere "sidekick" of founding father Sir Stamford Raffles but a fierce rival – at least in the world of natural science and history.

The exhibit, comprising 477 natural drawings of flora and fauna – most of which were native to Malacca, and done by two Chinese artists from 1819 to 1823 – is the biggest collection of natural history drawings from that period. It is the first time that the whole collection is on exhibit since 1827, when it was donated by Farquhar to the Royal Asiatic Society (RAS) in London.

In 1993, philanthropist G K Goh acquired the collection for \$3 million from the RAS. He donated it to the National Museum in 1996, where it is now considered a national treasure.

It's a national treasure that would have sunk into obscurity had Raffles' own collection of over 2,000 drawings survived when Raffles' ship caught fire on his way back to England.

But that freak accident is only the tip of the iceberg when it came to these two men's saga of bickering.

Iskander, 50, said that Raffles, who is credited for founding the London Zoo, wanted to be recognised as a premier naturalist and had the tendency to do so at all costs – like laying claim to Farquhar's discoveries. These included the black hornbill, the dugong, the malkoha (a kind of bird) and the tapir.

Farquhar would send his drawing and

account to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, but Raffles would inevitably read the account and claim it for his own by sending these to London where he was well-connected.

In the world of natural history, Farquhar is "completely overlooked", said Iskander. "This exhibit is an attempt to portray the underdog of early modern Singapore."

That underdog, he added, was a very eccentric one.

Farquhar stayed in Malacca for 15 years and had six children with his Malay wife – and kept a private zoo at his official residence, which included a tiger cub, a black panther, a wild dog, a porcupine, a monkey and a baby tapir.

"There were reports that the tapir

would come and eat scraps of food off the dining table," Iskander said.

During that time, he was called Rajah Melaka and is mentioned a lot in Malay historical literature. "He knew Malacca like the back of his hand."

Iskander added that when he went to Singapore, Farquhar was "well-loved and respected by the locals", accepting their quirks like cockfighting and gambling, activities that left Raffles "aghast".

The rivalry between the two reached the depths of pettiness when Raffles complained how Farquhar wasn't wearing his uniform properly.

The conflict between the two did not end when they both returned to England in mid-1820s, where Farquhar unsuccessfully challenged Raffles' claim to be the founder of Singapore.

"They did not reconcile up to the very end," said Iskander, adding that when Raffles' wife published a memoir about her husband, there was no mention of Farquhar.

Ironically, the "competition" between the two continues until today.

As *Empire of Nature*, also part of the Fort Canning Spice Trail, is being held at the National Museum, there's another exhibit halfway around the world – at the Liverpool Central Library – on the life of Raffles. It's called *The Spice Of Life*.



WHAT: EMPIRE OF NATURE
WHEN: UNTIL OCT 21
WHERE: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE
TICKETS: \$5 AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM