

When the marginalized are the majority: the Raffles Library & Museum in Singapore

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Abstract:

The era of formal colonialism is long behind us and its system of oppression no longer inspires fear or anger. This has generated a certain forgetfulness of the uglier realities of that historical period and in the absence of competing discourses it represents the creation of a long-term collective memory that negates or makes invisible the exploitation, misery and inhumanity that was the cornerstone of the colonial experience for the majority subjected to its control. Library history has a role to play here, if perhaps a small one in the grand scheme of things, for it can provide counter-discourses, in other words, evidence of this other face of colonialism – the neglect of the majority in favour of an alien minority. In this article, the Raffles Museum and Library provides both an example of this nostalgia as well as the possibility of a counter-discourse.

Keywords: Colonialism, nostalgia, library history, Singapore

Introduction

The era of formal colonialism is long behind us and its system of oppression no longer inspires fear or anger. In certain quarters it has actually become fashionable to suggest that colonialism was in fact terminated too early and that many places around the world were better off under European colonial regimes than they are now. For others, colonialism has assumed the form of a nostalgia that feeds a vibrant tourist industry. Here, the ceremonies and general lifestyle that animated a privileged colonial elite becomes representative of the experience of an entire era (Peleggi 2005; Bandyopadhyay 2012). Of course, many would argue that this nostalgic rendering of the past is harmless, but I would suggest instead that in the absence of competing discourses it represents the creation of a long-term collective memory that negates or makes invisible the exploitation, misery and inhumanity that was the cornerstone of the colonial experience for the majority subjected to its control.

Library history has a role to play here, if perhaps a small one in the grand scheme of things, for it can provide counter-discourses, in other words, evidence of this other face of colonialism – the neglect of the majority in favour of an alien minority. My focus in this work is the Raffles Museum and Library in Singapore. This library provides an excellent example of the points I wish to make.

The Raffles Museum and Library

The Raffles Museum and Library is today directly part of the colonial nostalgia industry as the building housing these institutions still stands. Now part of the National Museum of Singapore, this building with its beautiful colonial architecture beckons the visitor to embrace the dream of colonial nostalgia, rather than aim for a more reflective role of the institution as a partner in the colonial endeavour. Although it was the first to receive government funding, the Raffles Museum and Library was not the first library in Singapore. The Singapore Free School housed a small collection from 1837 onwards and in 1844 a number of prominent residents banded together to form the Singapore Library. This library was completely reliant on subscriptions for its survival and, not surprisingly, was frequently in financial difficulties. In 1874, its proprietors agreed to transfer their assets to the newly formed Raffles Library and Museum in return for the government taking over their debt and guaranteeing lifetime memberships to its founding partners.

Responsibility on a day-to-day basis for both the library and the museum rested in the hands of the Librarian and Curator, but supervising the institution were two committees, one for the library and the other for the museum. Members of these committees were chosen directly by the Governor of the Straits Settlements. The library itself was divided into reference and lending sections. Anyone could access material from the reference section, but only members could borrow from the lending collection. How many books could be borrowed at one time depended on membership status. By paying a higher fee it was possible to obtain a first-class subscription that allowed the user to borrow two books and one periodical at a time. The other option, second-class subscription, allowed for only one book. Subscribers chose their books from a collection that amounted to 3000 volumes in 1874 (Seet 1982, 22), but which had grown to 13,103 complete works by the end of the century. The size of its collection likely made the Raffles Library one of the largest in Southeast Asia at the time.

The nature of the Raffles Museum and Library

The Raffles Library was not particularly interested, except towards the end-days of British colonialism in the region, with the average inhabitant of the city. A few points of evidence should bear out this claim. To begin with, the collection of the library, up until the very eve of independence, was mostly in English in a colony where very few actually could read the language. Second, the library functioned on a subscription basis with prices far beyond what the average Singaporean could afford. For example, a second class subscription cost six dollars in 1874 which was a substantial investment at the time, given that even as late as 1908, Asian labourers received wages ranging between 50 cents to one dollar per day (Warren, 2003, p. 45). And finally, there was a covert (and sometimes overt) racism at work within the building itself. In the *Straits Times* of May 25, 1878 we find the following instructive quote: “The daily influx of native visitors to the Raffles Museum having reached an extent which almost precludes ladies from entering it, the rule has been adopted of reserving from 10AM to 1:30PM for natives, coolies, &c., and from 2PM to 5PM for European and other respectable visitors and ladies” (*Straits Times*, 1878, p. 4).

The main aim of the public side of the Raffles Library, an aim that has been forgotten for some time now, was the provision of entertainment and an “English atmosphere” to colonial civil servants and their families seen at danger from the tropical climate and foreign mores. This could be illustrated in a number of ways, but perhaps is best done by examining the Raffles Library policy towards fiction.

Most library historians are familiar with the great library fiction debates that took place over the course of the last quarter of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century in the United States and the United Kingdom. The debate was over the place fiction should have in the public library. Many librarians and literary scholars believed that a publicly funded institution should not be buying works meant for entertainment, and especially not inferior works meant for entertainment. But of course this was precisely what most users of the public library wanted (Carrier 1965; Sturges and Barr 1991; Snape 1995).

Now the interesting thing is that this debate never reached the shores of Singapore. We can tell that this was so through an examination of the still-existing catalogues dated from that time in combination with 1) an ALA list of the most banned books in American libraries and 2) the examples Ernest Baker provides to illustrate his typology of the fiction world.

The ALA List

The fledging ALA wanted to discover what literature its librarians found objectionable and to that end conducted a survey of seventy public libraries in the United States. In the survey, published in 1881, the ALA asked who the librarians believe to be potentially troublesome authors and what their policy was in respect to collecting their works: banned, purchased but banned later, or purchased and kept. Thirty libraries responded. Both American and UK authors appeared on the final list (Carrier 1965, 267–270).

Now if we compare the 1905 Raffles Library catalogue with this list the first thing to note is that none of the American authors were collected. But this is not surprising given the size of the library and its location in a British colony. If we remove the American authors we then find that the authors banned in a third or more of the surveyed libraries included: GWM Reynolds, ECG Murray, Helen Mathers, Mrs. Forrester, Ouida, Rhoda Broughton, Mrs. Henry Wood, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. All of these authors were publishing successes, but most were also considered as pandering to baser instincts either through melodramatic writing or “immoral” storylines. The Raffles library collected all seven (see Table 1). Although Reynolds is represented by only one title and Murray by only three, this compares to 55 titles by Braddon, 29 by Ouida, and 12 by Helen Mathers (who also had the dubious distinction of being the second most banned author in the American libraries).

Ernest Baker

Baker was a UK librarian, according to Robert Snape, ‘of immense influence’ in the debate over fiction in public libraries in the early twentieth century (Snape 1995, 59). In a 1907 article, written in order to help simplify the life of librarians, he suggested that fiction be divided into those works deserving a place in all libraries (Balzac, Turgenev, James and Conrad are examples he uses), “popular mediocrities and doubtful cases” (Corelli, Braddon, Wood, Worboise), and at the bottom “below the standard admissible” works of authors such as Florence Marryat, Guy Boothby, Annie Thomas and Dick Donovan (Baker 1907). Once again a look at the old catalogues tells us that in the case of the Raffles Library the lower class of authors was not discriminated against in any way (see Table 2). Only Wilson, of the fifteen

authors in this class, was not represented in the library's collection. But the two other classes also had gaps. Worboise and Bjornson had no titles either, despite being a "mediocrity" and good work respectively.

The roles and functions of the Raffles Museum and Library

So why was all this "mediocre" and "below standard" literature collected? As we have seen it was not collected to cater to the vast majority of Singapore's population who couldn't have afforded the subscription fee, even if they could have read English. My argument is that it was instead collected for the benefit of the small proportion of the population originating from Europe – the officials of the colonial state and the managers of the major commercial trading firms. These comprised the colony's elite and they needed to be both protected and unified.

Protecting Europeans

It was a common view held in the nineteenth and early twentieth century that Europeans could easily be the victims of various kinds of physical and moral "degeneracy" developed as a result of prolonged exposure to tropical environments (Thomas and Eves, 1999, pp. 136-42; Fischer-Tine, 2005, pp. 311-12; Warwick, 1996). Symptoms included irritability, troubled sleep, headaches, lack of concentration, procrastination, depression, and a general inability to plan. This was not just an individual problem, but also an issue for the colonial state as it was thought to reduce the capability of those persons to perform adequately at their jobs. And it was a security risk as it was widely believed that the image of the white man as invincible was the foundation of colonial rule. Degeneration threatened that belief to the core.

Until the 1920s and the development of psychoanalysis, medical expertise considered that the best way to deal with tropical neurasthenia, as the "disease" came to be called, was to regulate social life through the construction of micro-environments. Here then was a role for the library. Reading could create and maintain such an environment. Given its solitary nature it could serve as a means to temporarily remove the reader from the native and local surroundings that contributed to his illness. Roland Braddell, an eminent lawyer and long-term resident in Singapore, gave precisely this advice to newcomers: "remember that the country is just round the corner waiting to black-jack you. Don't admit that you are living in an Oriental country; live nearly as possible as you would in Europe. Read plenty, the mind needs more exercise than the body; keep yourself up to date ..." (Braddell 1982, 21). Thus it seems likely that The Raffles Library collection was to serve in the same manner as the circulating library did back home — a purveyor of entertaining books for the middle classes. In this sense, the library was the intellectual equivalent of the colonial 'hill station', a place where colonists could go to rest and recuperate from the rigours of an alien environment (Kenny 1995). It was not and never planned to be a place where the marginalized majority could go to learn to read or practice reading skills learned elsewhere or use these skills to create more enriching lives.

Unifying the European community

Anne Stoler argues that colonial communities, whether in Africa or Asia, were not unified. They were composed of groups with sometimes widely diverging interests, both between fellow colonists and the metropole state. This heterogeneity required mechanisms that would "overcome the economic and social disparities that would in other contexts separate and

often set their members in conflict” as well as to distinguish the colonists as a group from the colonised. It was therefore important that mechanisms to integrate and socialise the European population of the colonies be devised. These were often sought in institutions as diverse as clubs, standards of dress (Stoler, 1989, p. 137) and in French Indochina at least, a concern over the quality of opera facilities (McClellan, 2003). In Singapore, horse racing days, amateur theatricals, yacht races, and promenading on the esplanade were some of the activities used to unify the European community (Trocki, 2006, p. 45). Together the policies that gave rise to them amounted to an “internal civilizing mission” that matched the external mission to “civilize” the native population (Fischer-Tine, 2005, p. 298). In the case of Singapore, I would argue that the public library was created precisely to fulfil this internal mission.

Only during the 1920s and 1930s do we see evidence of a wider concern with the local people, and this, ironically enough, is not found in the annual report of the library, but in the pages of Singapore’s newspapers as a few liberal voices began to be heard advocating a wider role for a public library in the colony. As one member of this small group declared: “the time has come to convince the clerk that the city library is for him as well as the Europeans” (Straits Times, 1939, 10). But the demand fell on very deaf ears. Responding to a request to open the library into the evenings in order to better accommodate workers (most of whom would have been non-European), the director laconically noted that “when the financial stress is easier the idea is perhaps worthy of further investigation” (Raffles Library & Museum, 1920, 4). Instead attention was turned to accommodating the existing class of subscribers – the European elite. Much attention was paid in the annual reports to the efforts made by library staff to make the library attractive and comfortable – carpets, chair coverings, a special ladies reading room, potted plants. Attention was also paid to their reading needs as evidenced by the decision to purchase omnibus novels which apparently were most “suitable for those leaving the colony, on a short holiday” and concern that the staff, having little education, did not really know much about European literature and so could not help library subscribers (Raffles Library & Museum, 1933, 9).

Issues of wider access to the library had to wait till the post-war era and a political situation that would no longer tolerate the pampering of the European elite while at the same time ignoring the educational needs of the vast majority of Singaporeans. Post-war Singapore was not a peaceful place with activist trade union and political party activity demanding a new role for the state and a better deal for the majority. It became painfully aware to the British that if they were to maintain control of the island they would need to reform. And part of that reform was to cater to the library needs of the long marginalized majority. More attention was given to collecting in languages other than English, funding was provided to study how best to expand library service across the island, and the process of getting local Singaporeans trained as professional librarians began at last (Luyt 2009).

Conclusion

The era of colonialism ended in Singapore in 1963 and its oppressive nature no longer is foremost in the memories of the current generation. But that is no reason for the collective memory of the period to be dominated by the nostalgia generated by a tourism industry keen on marketing colonial era heritage. We need to remember the foundation of suffering and misery that the colonial system maintained as well as the graceful lines of the elite architecture it left behind. Developing a counter-discourse such I have in this article is one method to assist this remembrance.

Table 1: Top Banned UK Authors (taken from the 1881 ALA Survey of Potentially Objectionable Books).

Rank	Author	# of Libraries Banning the Author	Works of the author in the RLM Catalogue (1905)
1	GWM Reynolds	22	1
2	Helen Mathers	16	12
3	ECG Murray	14	3
4	Ouida	14	29
5	Mrs. Forrester	12	6
5	Braddon	12	55
6	Rhoda Broughton	11	17

Table 2: Works of authors used by Ernest Baker as examples of his fiction classification scheme found in the Raffles Library as of 1901.

“First Rank”	Number of Works
Balzac	11
Bjornson	0
Conrad	3
Ebers	9
Howells	17
James	20
Meredith	17
Raymond	2
Stockton	13
Turgenev	4
Wiggin	1
“Popular Mediocrities”	
Braddon	55
Barrett	12
Cameron	17
Cleeve	1
Corelli	14
Hume	18
Hungerford	13
Hyne	5
Oppenheim	4
Ouida	29
Wood	34
Worboise	0
“Below the standard”	
Boothby	18
Donovan	8
Gould	4
Gunter	3
Le Queux	13
Lee	9
Marryat	38
Muddock	6
Rita	20
Russell	2
Savage	9
Speight	5
Thomas	19
Wilson	0
Yorke	5

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