

The gripping tale of South-east Asia's first natural history museum and its new lease of life.



BY INVITATION

By PETER NG KEE LIN
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A Singapore legacy comes full circle

OUROBOROS is the name of a mythological Greek snake – a snake that consumes its own tail. It is one of the oldest mystical concepts known to man, first observed in Egypt 1,600 years before Christ. A powerful symbol of the cyclical nature of time. About coming full circle, and then starting again.

Such are the strange and interesting life and times of Singapore's museum of natural history.

From roots that trace back to 1823, when Stamford Raffles himself mooted the idea of a Singapore Institution for natural history; then 1849, when two coins donated by the Temenggong of Johor were acquired by the colonial government and the idea of a museum was seeded; to the establishment of a legal body, the Raffles Museum, in 1878.

This entity is South-east Asia's first natural history museum. But the world is an unpredictable place – many dramatic events occurred. Between 1942 and 1945, Singapore experienced a war of unprecedented cruelty and violence when the Japanese occupied the territory. Through fortune, the museum survived.

Then in 1965, Singapore was suddenly no longer part of the Federation of Malaysia but an independent country. And in these traumatic times, as a young nation grappled for survival, the Raffles Museum became the National Museum of Singapore.

And the powers to be were confronted with a decision. Two "needs" collided – the need for economic survival and the need for heritage. Both causes were important – just that one was more immediate.

Decisions have consequences. In the ensuing tragedy, there was no place in the "new" museum for the century-old collection of animals. Specimens which once awed a mesmerised public and were the legacies of hundreds of research scientists from around the world were deemed expendable.

Out of sheer necessity and providence, the homeless treasures found an unlikely temporary residence in the then University of Singapore.

It was left to the stubborn and seemingly illogical persistence of a few good men and women left in the museum and nascent university to hold the fort.

Backdropped against the fading light of the Raffles Museum, this generation of scientists ensured the collection survived. Not by design but through fortitude. Failure was never an option. And failure would have been terrible.

A 'pariah' collection

AT THAT juncture in time, giving the country's heritage and treasure away to another land was an option. Even throwing it away in the rubbish heap was an option. The collection did not survive unscathed. In those times of tribulation, we gave Malaysia the whale skeleton that had adorned

the original Raffles Museum building since 1907. And in the process, we gave away the memories of three generations of Singaporeans. This is one hair shirt we will have to wear for generations to come.

Nothing ever stays the same. As the world changed, and a young Singapore grew stronger, wealthier and confident, it also became more sentient. Desperation was replaced by a new appreciation of our past.

The "pariah" Raffles collection became the Zoological Reference Collection of the Department of Zoology in the university in 1972. It had no permanent home and only a skeleton crew. It was a nomad, homeless, even when the University of Singapore fused with Nanyang University to form the National University of Singapore.

Only in 1988, after 16 years of wandering, was a purpose-built abode created in the new university campus of Kent Ridge. Opened by the nation's Education Minister at that time, Dr Tony Tan, this landmark event was witnessed by arguably the most famous director the museum ever had, the late Michael Tweedie. He was with the museum for 24 years between 1932 and 1956, and discovered

hundreds of new species of reptiles, amphibians, fish, crustaceans and molluscs.

Past and present met to witness what was then widely believed to be the ultimate salvation of the Raffles collection. Not exactly the old museum in its heyday, but at least it had a permanent home – or so we thought then!

In 1998, the powers at the university decided that the collection should become a research facility. It morphed into the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research in the Faculty of Science. And a new Education Minister, Mr Teo Chee Hean, heralded its revival in 2001.

Acts of madness

IN THOSE halcyon times, some "nationalists" questioned why the university should retain the name of "Raffles" for the facility. Was this name but a vestige of a coloni-

al memory that was best excised in the name of national pride? The heart says yes but the head says no. The Raffles name is not merely to honour an Englishman who founded modern Singapore. The name is a link to the museum's history. It is its bloodline. Good or bad, right or wrong – it is part of the museum's bloodline.

The bloodline echoes its own wants. It surpasses human intent. It brings out visionaries and heroes. It compels "acts of madness" – it encourages "impossible dreams". But "madness" and "impossible" are relative terms.

I like the definitions of these two powerful words by acclaimed US journalist Ambrose Bierce, author of the classic lexicon, *The Devil's Dictionary*: madness – one who is affected with a high degree of intellectual independence; and impossible – something "lacking in patience and money". Like Singapore – "mad" to be a

separate island-state and "impossible" for it to survive. Really?

The bloodline ensured that the Raffles Museum was revived as the new Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. Resurrected with the unwavering support of former president S R Nathan, and the financial might and philanthropic largesse of the Lee Foundation. As well as an army of donors and fellow believers.

A "ground-up" exercise that fulfilled the "impossible dream", to the tune of \$56 million – enough to build a new museum of substantial substance, and add three dinosaurs to boot. In the words of our second prime minister Goh Chok Tong, NUS has, to all intents and purposes, built a "People's Museum". Or as the museum's own staff quip – it is a "museum of the impossible".

It has taken NUS a long time to achieve the "impossible dream" – 45 years since it left Stamford Road in the then National Museum, and over 10 years since it was tasked by Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh to try nevertheless.

NUS apologises to Singapore for this tardiness in delivery. The difficult, NUS will normally do immediately. The impossible, that takes a little longer. But it has now been done.

As much as money is the lifeblood of a project – however noble – the building of a true natural history museum is not just about concrete and hardware. It needs one element money cannot buy. Heart. People with heart. And the staff of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, some who have been with the institution under one name or another for over 40 years, stepped up to the plate when it mattered.

The money enabled. The people ensured. The passion, energy and work ethos of the old museum staff – over and far above what is expected of normal employees – helped make the "impossible dream" a reality. Dreamers and doers. Heroes and heroines. They believed in the cause – even when it caused them no end of grief. As the French artist Renoir once remarked, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains". And that beauty is a state-of-the-art natural history museum for Singapore that opened in time for its 50th birthday.

Natural history lives on

THE new museum is more than just a guardian of our memories. The nostalgia I see in the older generation of Singaporeans when they glimpse "old friends" in the gallery is palpable. It is an emotional roller coaster for them. The museum is a time capsule for the old. It is a wellspring of memories for the young.

It is also a symbol – a symbol of our need to appreciate fellow life forms we share the earth with. To catalogue, to document our fellow denizens. To know so we can understand, so we can protect. It is a tool of science, an engine for education, and a means to empower the next generation, so they do not repeat the environmental sins of their forefathers.

The museum is a symbol of our humanity and our responsibility as good planetary guardians. To give young people "impossible dreams" so our very real nightmares do not recur.

The year 2015 is Singapore's 50th year of independence, the nation's golden jubilee. It is also NUS' 110th year of founding. Today, the Education Minister of 1988 is the seventh President of Singapore. Today, our Education Minister of 2001 is the nation's Deputy Prime Minister.

Today, we mourn our whale, even as we cheer our three dinosaurs. Today, the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research is the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. Today, the original vision of Stamford Raffles for a "Singapore Institution" is revived – as a museum for Singapore and South-east Asia's biodiversity.

Ouroboros is about the cyclical nature of time and endurance.

There is a belief that the origins of the famous mathematical symbol for infinity – the famous "lazy eight" or lemniscate – was derived from an Ouroboros overlapping in the middle. It makes sense. After all, the Ouroboros also represents an entity that persists from the beginning with such force and quality, it cannot be extinguished. That entity is Singapore's original and first natural history museum.

✉ stopinion@sph.com.sg

The writer, a systematic biologist who is an expert on crabs, is head of the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum at the National University of Singapore.

