

Producing knowledge about Malaya: Readers, Contributors, Printers, Editors, and the Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in the 1950s

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Abstract

The creation and dissemination of knowledge about the various parts of the British Empire was an important component of the imperial mission. This article examines one of the vehicles charged with knowledge dissemination in British Malaya, the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. More specifically it focuses on the community of contributors, readers, printers, and editors that came together around the publication in the 1950s, the twilight of British rule on the peninsula. We can look at this community as a fragile web of elements or actors responsible for producing the *Journal*, which over the course of the decade rapidly began to unravel for a number of reasons (difficulties in conducting local research, a decline in the number of contributors as the British colonial officials left the country without being replaced, delays in publication, and a lack of skilled printers, among others) so that by the 1960s there was some doubt that the publication would survive.

Keywords

British Empire, British Malaya, knowledge dissemination, knowledge creation, imperialism, colonialism, scientific periodicals, Carl Gibson-Hill

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Introduction

Over the past few decades historians of the British Empire have stressed the role that knowledge played in its creation and maintenance, making the point that knowledge production and transmission was an important component of imperial rule.¹ Of course, this knowledge did not come in some unsubstantiated or ethereal form. It was embodied in various kinds of documents, originally letters and travel accounts, but later also in the form of scholarly journal articles and monographs. Neither was it produced outside institutional contexts. Early European accounts of the flora and fauna of the non-European world were enabled by the activities of trading companies such as the East India Company, or religious orders such as the London Missionary Society. In the days of

formal empire, the colonial administration itself was the home for many producers of colonial knowledge, but institutions specializing in knowledge production and dissemination were also established. Among the most famous of these were the British Museum and Kew Gardens. At first mostly resident in the United Kingdom, by the end of the formal empire in the 1950s similar institutions had spread to many of its outposts.²

This article deals with one of these specialized institutions – the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. Few detailed studies have been made on the knowledge producing institutions of British Malaya or the Straits Settlements.³ The focus in this article is on the Society's journal or more specifically the community of readers, contributors, printers, and editors that came together around its publication in the 1950s. We can look at this community as a fragile web of elements or actors responsible for producing the *Journal*, which over the course of the 1950s rapidly began to unravel so that by the 1960s there was some doubt that the publication would survive.

The Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society and its Journal

The last quarter of the 19th century saw increased British activity and influence over the interior of the Malayan peninsula. As both government and private firms entered into areas previously unknown to them their lack of knowledge about the land and its people was made abundantly clear. It was in this context that the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society was established on May 6, 1878 by a group of senior administrators in the colonial government. The content of the *Journal* was dictated by the geographical theme of Malaya, rather than any particular subject and over the years it included works in the natural sciences (fauna, flora, geology, and meteorology) as well as the social sciences (ethnology and anthropology) and humanities (Malay language, literature and history).⁴ But it was never a journal made to be read by scientists and scholars alone. At its inception the journal tended to publish easy-to-read accounts of travel by members rather than academic articles, but as the interior of the country was opened to Europeans, these contributions appeared to have dried up without being replaced by anything more substantial. It was only during the 1890s that this drought seems to have been overcome, perhaps due to the fame of the editor of that time, R.N. Ridley, who is better known as a pioneer of rubber cultivation in British Malaya.⁵ The pendulum began to shift to the other extreme after the First World War as discontent over the publishing of what were considered an inappropriate number of overly technical and scientific articles led to another crisis in the affairs of the Society that was only gradually resolved as a new generation of contributors began to write on the history and ethnography of the region.⁶ Around this time as well, the name of the society was changed to the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (MBRAS). The Japanese occupation of Malaya between 1942 and 1945 suspended the Society's activities, but its records, along with the rest of the Raffles Library & Museum were preserved intact. A priority after the war was to restart the *Journal* with the first post-war issue published in 1947 under the editorship of Carl Gibson-Hill.

The impetus for the creation of the Journal in the 19th century was the need for knowledge of those parts of Malaya increasingly coming under the influence of the colonial government. In the immediate post-war years and the 1950s this need for knowledge continued, but for much different reasons⁷. Whereas the 19th century traced the rise of British influence on Malayan affairs, the 1950s saw the beginning of its end.

The humiliating defeat of the British at the hands of the Japanese in 1942 has set in motion forces that in the end precluded the re-establishment of empire after the cessation of hostilities. Not only was the notion of European superiority permanently broken, but the flames of nationalist aspiration had been stoked. When the British did return it was no longer on the same terms as when they left. From the perspective of British officials and businessmen though, the former colony was an important one to keep in the Empire for its strategic geographical location, as well as its agricultural and mineral wealth. Many quickly saw the need to reform the socio-political order to at least partially accommodate the desires of Malaysians for a new society. Hence, while condoning the brutal suppression of radical as well as armed insurgents, the colonial government held out programmes of welfare in the fields of health and education as tokens of its reformed nature. But the government also wanted to enlarge the public sphere in order to create a political consensus for the continuation of some sort of imperial connection between Malaya and the United Kingdom. This was a most difficult task due not only to the ideological cleavages in society, but also racial tensions between the indigenous Malays, and more recent Chinese and Indian immigrants. What was really needed was a national culture that could form the basis for a moderate multi-cultural politics. In order to achieve this aim the government encouraged the creation of arts and cultural institutions (museums, galleries, libraries, and universities) throughout the territory in order to plant the seeds of “a cultural renaissance” on the peninsula. It is in this vision that we can see the functional utility of JMBRAS. Its aim of collecting and recording information on things Malayan could serve as an information source for the educational efforts of the British, busy as they were in trying to create citizens for a pluralistic and moderate public sphere that would allow them either to remain in Malaya in some form, or as was actually the case, continue to exert influence in a fully independent country.

Contributors

From 1947 to 1960, one hundred contributors wrote for the *Journal*. The vast majority were European. Wang Gung Wu, famous later as a historian of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, and Zainal Abidin Admad were exceptions. A further division can be made between those contributors who were professional scholars, that is, employed by universities and those who were not (usually colonial administrators).

As Gibson-Hill noted, the amateurs likely wrote for the *Journal* from a feeling of “enthusiasm”⁸ for their subject; it was a hobby that gave them intrinsic pleasure. John Gullick, one of the most prolific authors in these years, wrote on the occasion of the successful publication of one of his papers, that “it is always rather an excitement to see one’s efforts in print”.⁹ F.H. Pearson continued to write history for the *Journal* even after taking on a demanding job as an agricultural labourer at a Government Experimental Farm in the United Kingdom, suggesting the great pleasure he must have got out of the process.¹⁰ Geoffrey Marrison’s work on Buddhist votive tablets attests to his enjoyment of research and writing as a hobby as the process of writing up his findings took over four years and saw him through changes in jobs¹¹, marriage¹², and the assumption of duties as a pastor.¹³

For the professional historians, however much they may have enjoyed it, writing was also an integral part of their job. H.R.C. Wright, a scholar based in South Africa, provides us with an especially clear example of this professional imperative as he seems

to have turned to *JMBRAS* whenever other outlets refused his work. Towards the end of 1952, for example, he wrote to Gibson-Hill in order to submit a piece entitled “The Land Question in Java 1794-1814” noting that he had previously submitted it to the *Economic History Review* but that “they could not find space for an article of that length (34 typed pages) on that subject”,¹⁴ also noting that he “was anxious to dispose finally of what I have written.”¹⁵ For him the *Journal* was an expedient place to put work that didn’t fit elsewhere, allowing him to save it from oblivion.

But other than this basic underlying motivation, shared by all professional scholars, there were additional reasons why the professionals wrote for the *Journal*. Rodney Needham, an anthropologist working among the forest people of Sarawak at the time, wrote to “stir someone up” sufficiently to work on what he referred to as “this Murut matter.”¹⁶ And he specifically seems to have chosen the *Journal* as his vehicle in order to engage in what Judith Heimann tells us was a long-standing debate with Tom Harrisson of the Sarawak Museum over the ethnography of the Penan people.¹⁷ The correspondence between Needham and Gibson-Hill lends additional support to Heimann’s view, with Needham repeatedly writing to the *JMBRAS* editor over his concerns about the accuracy of his articles worrying that a printer’s error would “give T.H. a barbed spear to thrust in my liver!”¹⁸ and “another claw.”¹⁹ In this quarrel between rival scholars, Gibson-Hill and his journal assumed the role of a convenient and friendly ally, one that was all the more necessary due to the fact that the other likely outlet for his geographically focused work was the *Sarawak Museum Journal* which was firmly under the control of Harrisson.

But Needham was also writing for posterity, in one case confiding to Gibson-Hill that although “parts of it [his latest submission] are tedious” the information it contained “really has to be said and placed on record somewhere.”²⁰ This was a sentiment shared by other professional scholars writing for the *Journal* and which generated a kind of genre of its own: the combination translation or edited version of a manuscript accompanied by a brief introduction or set of notes. Graham Irwin wrote to Gibson-Hill asking that he assist in publishing a long letter by Abraham Couperus, the last Dutch Governor of Malacca, because it was likely the only existing record giving the Dutch perspective on the siege and hence would be of interest to “students of Malayan history.”²¹ Northcote Parkinson, head of history at the University of Malaya, was also concerned with preservation when he wrote to Gibson-Hill asking if he would be willing to publish extracts and illustrations from the diary of Lieutenant R.N. Bayly as the officer wrote as an eye witness to the Perak War of 1875-76,²² while John Bastin wrote advocating the publication “with a short introduction” of the diary of Thomas Otho Travers which he pleaded “was worth publishing” in the *Journal*.²³ For these authors, the *Journal* became a repository to save from oblivion source documents for Malayan history at a time when the study of this history was at its infancy.

The difficulties of research into this history were formidable, being one of the main themes to emerge from the correspondence of the contributors with Gibson-Hill over the years. Bruno Latour in his discussion about what distinguished Western science from other world views has developed the concept of immutable mobiles and centres of calculation to explain the key difference – Western science created not only documents, but summaries of documents and summaries of the summaries in a cascading flow of documentation (immutable mobiles) that eventually ended up in storehouses of

knowledge (centres of calculation) at the centre of the European empires. Here they could be used to rule at a distance.²⁴ Of course Latour has overstated both the control that European imperial powers actually had over much of their empires, but also of the usefulness of much of the knowledge they collected.²⁵ Nevertheless, the fact that most of the large centres of calculation resided in Europe put historians resident in British Malaya and the Strait Settlements and other colonies around the world at a significant disadvantage, which is reflected in the surviving *JMBRAS* correspondence.

Gibson-Hill shows himself well aware of the likely difficulties Gerald Tibbetts, an expert on Arab seafaring, would face correcting proofs of his manuscript when he wrote that he had expected him at Oxford “with a good library at hand” rather than as a newly appointed librarian at the University of Khartoum in the Sudan.²⁶ Similarly Needham was able to use the lack of a decent library as a convenient excuse to explain the fact that he was not able to submit anything more substantial than notes to the *Journal* in a letter to Gibson-Hill in 1955.²⁷ And Geoffrey Marrison wasn’t aware, until he had returned to the United Kingdom and had renewed access to its libraries, of an important article by George Coedes dealing with the very subject of Buddhist votive tablets that he was busily preparing an article on for the *Journal*.

In a number of cases, scholars preferred to hold off submitting articles if they had planned trips to Europe for purposes of leave or employment in order to consult collections relevant to their work. The Dutch scholar of Malay, P.E. de Josselin de Jong, for example, leaving the University of Malaya for a position at Leiden, informed Gibson-Hill that he needed to look up twenty-six references available in Holland before his article on the Singapore-Malacca Sultanate would be ready. He noted that the references could be microfilmed and shipped to Singapore, but that he would “prefer to wait and read them once I am in Holland.”²⁸ Part of the reason de Jong was reticent about ordering microfilms was the length of time it would take for the holding archive or library to accede to his request as the problems posed by his peripheral location were exacerbated by the lack of poorly developed inter-library loan facilities. De Jong’s colleague at the University of Malaya, Ian MacGregor, a specialist on the Portuguese in southeast Asia, had this problem a few years earlier with his work on the Johore Lama archaeological site. He wrote Gibson-Hill apologizing for his tardiness in submitting revisions, noting in his defense that “unfortunately, I am still hung up waiting for a couple of films from London.”²⁹

As well as having to make allowance for the difficulties of finding and working with the source material, the *Journal* was faced with the need to manage changes in the composition of its contributors as amateurs gave way to professional scholars over the course of the 1950s. If we divide the years under consideration (1947 to 1960) into half and compare the top ten contributors for each period we find only one professional historian on the list in the earlier period while five appear in the later period (see Table 1). The shift might have taken place earlier, but for the unique circumstances that the Pacific War created. Gibson-Hill, taking on the mantle of editor immediately afterwards noted that: “We certainly lost some valuable unpublished material during the war, but in a number of cases the authors put their work together again during their post-internment leaves, while others, inspired by a sudden rush of enthusiasm, began work which they had long had in mind. In addition, as you may have noticed, the British forces in Malaya before and after the war included a few men interested in anthropology etc. who collected

material on things Malayan which they would not otherwise have been able to do. Finally, a few men, like Sheppard, began long papers in internment, when under normal conditions they might never have started the work.”³⁰

Table 1: Ten top authors by period

	1947 to 1953		1954 to 1960
Gibson-Hill	10	Gibson-Hill	16
Winstedt	10	Sieveking	7
Braddell	7	Wheatley	6
Linehan	6	Needham	6
Wurtzburg	6	Bastin	4
Quaritch-Wales	5	MacGregor	4
Gullick	4	Winstedt	3
Harrison, T	4	Gullick	3
Hill	3	Hill	3
Skeat	3	Turnbull	3

By the mid-1950s, as a group, the amateurs were a dying breed, rapidly being replaced by local staff who did not apparently view the writing of research articles as a hobby. Gibson-Hill was “much troubled” by the affect this process would have on the journal,³¹ but there was little he could do about it. Even before the effects of Malayanization had become fully apparent, he believed that “few if any of the younger people are really interested in things Malay or Malayan. They will read – membership is now beyond all previous records – but not write.”³² The *Journal* would have to rely on professional scholars instead and here it was fortunate that the 1950s saw the beginnings of a rapid expansion in Southeast Asian studies.³³ All other things being equal, this switch in the composition of contributors should not have been problematic, but not all was equal. Weakening the contributors’ strand of the web as the years went by were the increasing delays in publication which made at least some contributors wary of submitting their work. Ken Treggonning, in a long letter to Gibson-Hill in 1958, was the first to note that publication delays had begun to influence author decisions about submitting to the *Journal*, when he wrote of one of his colleagues that “he is reluctant to submit them [articles] as he feels they may not be printed for some years. Another good reason for giving us another journal soon.”³⁴ Politely worded inquiries as to the status of particular articles appear in the 1960s. Needham, for example, writing to Gibson-Hill’s secretary, noted that “I know how difficult publication in Singapore is, and I well appreciate the difficulties under which Gibson-Hill labours, but I wonder whether you could give me any idea of when the issue containing this article may be expected to appear?”³⁵ Latter these turned into requests to withdraw papers. De Jong rationalized his request to withdraw a book review he had submitted by noting that “it is rather unpleasant for an author to have to wait too long before any review of his book appears – particularly if he knows that a review has been written, but others, written later, are published sooner.”³⁶ We do not know if he actually was successful, but the annual report for 1960 records that A.J. Hill had pulled his *Hikayat Raja Pasai* for publication elsewhere.³⁷

By the end of the 1950s it would have appeared to observers that the ability to attract contributors was in serious jeopardy. Not only were the difficulties of local research formidable as noted above, but the opportunity presented by the growth of Southeast Asian studies seemed difficult to capitalize on as scholars increasingly saw the *Journal* as inordinately tardy in getting articles into print.

The Readers

Table 2 presents data gleaned from the annual reports of the Society on the overall number of members from 1946 to 1960, plus 1941 figures for a pre-war comparison. From a low of 258 in 1946, the Society enjoyed healthy growth in its membership until 1953. A small decline in 1954 was more than offset by a rise in the following year. However, this was the peak. Succeeding years saw declines in membership until by 1960 it stood at only 371 people. This data on membership suggests a robust growth from 1949 to 1955 and a large drop starting in 1957. What accounts for this? One explanation lies in the rapid replacement of expatriate Europeans with predominantly Malay personnel throughout the offices of government as the country was groomed for independence (British Malaya became independent Malaysia in 1957), without a corresponding increase in local membership of the Society. This is borne out by an analysis of the Society's membership directory, published in the first issue of each volume between the years 1947 and 1958. The directory included names, addresses, and, for the earlier issues, dates of first membership. The names provide us with a clue to ethnicity; whether the member was "European", "Chinese", "Malay", or "Indian", for example. Table 3 presents this data for the years 1949, 1952, 1955, and 1958. In all these years, European members remained the most numerous, but their relative weighting fell from 80 percent to 68 percent of the total. The Chinese members of the society exhibit the fastest growth in numbers during this period, representing only six percent of the total in 1949, but close to 14.5% in 1958. Over the course of this period the Malay numbers rose from twelve percent to a little less than 17 percent, while Indian members actually declined from roughly 1.5% in 1949 to 1% in 1958. This loss of European members appears to have been noticed by at least one correspondent who "supposed a good many members have left the country in the last nine months. I wonder if the Malayanization policy is going to hurt the Society seriously?"³⁸ Gibson-Hill was also aware of the problem as he commented to long-time Society member Roland Braddell that he would like to produce a work similar to *An Anecdotal History of Singapore* (published in 1902), but believed that a market for the work no longer existed, presumably because of the dwindling number of European colonists interested in what amounted to Eurocentric local history.³⁹ Equally problematic to the chances of retaining members, however, was the publishing record of *JMBRAS*. By 1958, Gibson-Hill was finding it difficult to publish issues in a timely fashion and as the main benefit of membership in the Society was the *Journal*, this was likely a significant disincentive to join.

When we turn to the correspondence we find direct traces of the readers and, more often, traces of readers as imagined by the editor and his close associates with whom he was in contact. The direct evidence provided by the readers is not of the most informative nature. We would like to know why they subscribed to the journal, how they learned of its existence, and the kinds of articles they enjoyed most. Little of this kind of information is available in the surviving correspondence, with one exception. A certain

Bertram Gray wrote that he wanted to subscribe to the journal because “after 42 years in Malaya, which I have come to look upon as my home by choice, I am keenly interested in all matters concerning the country.”⁴⁰ We also know that from time to time a reader would write in to congratulate Gibson-Hill on his editorship. P.L. Dickson, for example, in the course of informing the Society of a change in his address, wrote: “I should like to express my appreciation of your remarkable work with the journal. In both quality and quantity it is a great achievement.”⁴¹ In another case, Gibson-Hill received three letters commenting on the quality of the most recent edition of the journal; he forwarded these to the printers for them to share in the praise.⁴²

Table 2: Membership figures for the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society

Year	Number of Ordinary Members
1941	508
1946	258
1947	407
1948	499
1949	540
1950	620
1951	703
1952	753
1953	816
1954	793
1955	822
1956	821
1957	614
1958	609
1959	504
1960	371

Table 3: Ethnicity of members of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society

Ethnicity/Year	1949	1952	1955	1958
European	80.1%	76%	69.5%	68.2%
Malay	12.3%	14.4%	16%	16.6%
Chinese	6.1%	8.4%	12.4%	14.4%
Indian	1.4%	1.2%	2%	1%

There are no letters directly criticizing the journal. The only major complaint, especially towards the end of the decade as arrears of the journal began to mount up, was over the apparent non-delivery of the most recent issue. Among the harshest of these was one letter written by E.L.S. Jennings: “I write to enquire why the Society has published so little in its Journal for the years 1957, 1958, and 1959? Is it due to a lack of suitable material or a lack of funds? For many years the Journal has been a valuable publication. Serious students of Malayan matters must regret the lack of regularity in publishing it in recent years.”⁴³

From the correspondence we can also gather that there existed a group of non-regular readers who requested certain issues of the *Journal*. Noori bin Haji Ismail was one of these letter-writers, “badly in need of ‘A History of the Malay Literature’ by R.O. Winstedt.”⁴⁴ Ismail’s address was the Government English School, so we can assume that he was a teacher. This kind of sporadic reader was not appreciated to any great extent by the Society, or at least its editor, who believed that serious students of Malayan affairs would want an annual subscription rather than the occasional issue.⁴⁵ Occasionally requests would be received from readers asking for reprints or permission to copy certain works. Bashir Mallal, for example, was the compiler of a local work of reference, *Mallal’s Digest of Malayan Case Law*. In 1957 he was preparing a supplement to this work and wished to include extracts from articles published by former Justice E.N. Taylor on Malay customary law in order “to assist the legal profession.”⁴⁶ In other cases, government departments would request material as the Rural and Industrial Development Authority did in May of 1958 when it asked for copies of de Morgan’s article “Brass and White-Metal Work in Trengganu.”⁴⁷

The Imagined Reader

Here we are referring not to imaginary readers per se, but to the image of the reader as mediated through the letters of Gibson-Hill and his correspondents (usually contributors or Society council members). These traces reveal that the editor was involved in a balancing act between on the one hand a group of readers very much interested in and familiar with the body of colonial knowledge of Malaya and another, which was interested, but only in a general way and not to the same depth or extent as the former.

In a letter to one of his closest contributors, Gibson-Hill reveals that he wants the *JMBRAS* to appeal to a more general class of readers, writing that he was “trying to get the journal [articles that are] interesting, as well as informative and a contribution to study of Malaya” with pieces such as Gullick’s “Captain Speedy of Larut” “brightening” the journal considerably.⁴⁸ The need for balance between the two readerships is also evident in another letter where Gibson-Hill outlines an upcoming issue to a correspondent: “I hope to have another issue out soon, with some quite important (but not readable) stuff by Wheatley in it, and a very interesting and I think readable paper by George Bogaars.”⁴⁹ Similarly, he was interested in printing an English translation of two Malay stories as “many people interested in these things cannot read Malay or do not read it freely.”⁵⁰

But the fact that some of the articles he received for publication were specialized and too erudite for the majority of the journal’s readers was not something that Gibson-Hill loathed or tried to avoid whenever he could. When, for example, P.E. de Josselin de Jong submitted a translation and commentary of a Malay legal text he wrote apologetically that he “was well aware that this type of text is not of great interest to the general reader and not likely to add to the popularity of the journal.”⁵¹ Gibson-Hill was quick to reply that “nonetheless I am most pleased to publish works like this at intervals, as they represent a high level of scholarship and are one of the justifications for our existence.”⁵² On another occasion Gibson-Hill, commenting in regard to a reviewer of one article, wrote “I think sometimes he is unduly put off by the documentation [footnotes], but in many cases it is highly desirable and with goodwill and very little practice one becomes accustomed to ignoring the references.”⁵³ Even the scourge of

popular writing, footnotes, was accepted as a necessary part of the *Journal*. Balance was important and both groups of readers needed to be courted.

This was not due to some form of intellectual idealism, but a reflection of financial necessity. *JMBRAS* received a substantial government subsidy predicated on its dissemination of original knowledge about British Malaya, hence the need for scholarly rigour and thoroughness. Articles that “brightened” pages needed to be balanced against those requiring deeper intellectual engagement, especially since the former could arguably be printed in the commercial press (and on occasion apparently were).⁵⁴ On the other hand, the subsidy didn’t cover by any means all of the expenses incurred in publication and for this reason membership subscriptions were important as well. Too many legal digests would have seen membership figures plummet. Unfortunately, as we have seen, the membership figures clearly show that he had failed to keep the readers on his side over the course of the decade despite his attempts at providing a balance between the popular and esoteric. Thus another key strand holding the *Journal* together as an institution producing and disseminating knowledge about Malaya was unraveling by the end of the 1950s.

Printers

The third strand in the web holding the *Journal* together, and one of the weakest, was the printing industry of Singapore. There are very few positive references to printing in the Gibson-Hill correspondence. On at least one occasion a contributor praised a particular job⁵⁵, but printing was generally seen as a problematic affair. To begin with there were limitations of the technology. The printing of illustrations was especially a concern here. The printing options for illustrations in Singapore at the time appear to have consisted of line block or half-tone reproduction. But from an early date, half-tone reproduction seems to have been of low quality. In 1952 Gibson-Hill apologized to Parkinson for substituting line for half-tone blocks during the course of printing his article, noting that “we were having a lot of trouble” with the originals.⁵⁶ A year later problems with illustrations had gotten “steadily worse”⁵⁷ and by 1955 he appears to have given up on half-tone reproduction noting that such work “ranges uncontrollably from poor to mediocre”⁵⁸ and that “half-tone blocks do not keep well here.”⁵⁹ But even line block printing wasn’t trouble free, ranging from “from mediocre to good” only.⁶⁰

Printing text was not trouble-free either. Letterpress printing was predominant in Singapore at the time and this required type to be cast manually or by a linotype machine and placed in shallow trays called galleys. A rough print was produced from the galley and returned to the editor and author to check for errors. If errors were found they could be corrected but if the corrections involved changing the length of a line it would be necessary to either pull or push text to or from the next line and so on to the end of the paragraph. Errors of course had to be corrected, but stylistic changes or substantial changes in content had to be avoided at all costs. Not all the contributors seemed to understand the labour intensive process involved and on some occasions Gibson-Hill received requests to make major changes to texts after submission. Some were repeat offenders: “Time has also been wasted by two authors who have been troublesome for years, and of whom one, as his latest effort, followed up his paper by sending nearly two hundred amendments to the text.”⁶¹

But perhaps a more serious problem was the number of errors in the galleys created by the printers themselves. Such mistakes were a constant source of grief and the staff of the printing firm usually employed for the work was frequently taken to task for introducing errors to manuscripts during the printing process. Gibson-Hill writing to one contributor complained of the carelessness of the compositors who delivered to him a set of proofs “not fit for your eyes (and waste of your time).”⁶² This problem of inadequate proofs was repeated on many occasions. Needham wrote of one set of proofs that “the opening paragraph struck me greatly. Why are the notes based on ‘a few hours questioning’? God knows what the printers are doing with it.”⁶³ Similarly deletions of text occurred in a work submitted by MacGregor a year previously⁶⁴ and Marjorie Topley found that in her proofs “the silly fools have left out quite a few lines and set others in the wrong order.”⁶⁵ Printing also had rules or conventions about things such as when to break words and lines, the length of lines, and the positioning of paragraphs⁶⁶, but the printers appeared to ignore these on occasion as well. In one letter Gibson-Hill complains of the positioning of a footnote that the “fools should have broken ... not run as a 7 ½ inch page: god knows who feeds and bathes them.”⁶⁷ In another he writes apologetically “I am sorry ... you had so many corrections to make. As you know, I did not look at this lot before posting them, as they came in late. But they were the fourth set, including galley proofs. In several cases they had failed to make corrections asked for on the third set. Elsewhere they had made new mistakes.”⁶⁸ The carelessness of the printers seems to have frustrated Gibson-Hill immensely, suggesting that it wasn’t a rare occurrence. In another letter to Topley, for example, he wrote that while he would do his best to make sure her corrections were understandable to an intelligent person it did not “ensure that such a person will handle them.”⁶⁹ And in the margins of a letter he received from a contributor returning one set of corrected proofs and asking for the set for a second article, he wrote sarcastically that it was “at the printers, who are busy turning all the ‘a’s and ‘u’s upside down as well.”⁷⁰

It is not surprising that contributors and editor complained of the printing. The printing industry in Singapore was not in the best condition in the 1950s. Its workers had relatively low levels of literacy compared not only to the UK, but to regional competitors such as Japan and Hong Kong. It was also an industry facing a shortage of labour, at least in the higher end, skilled positions such as linotype operators. The war had created a backlog of printing jobs that had encouraged numerous small firms to enter the market, but as the backlog was cleared many of these firms resorted to price-cutting to keep themselves financially solvent, in the process creating headaches for more established firms capable and willing to improve the skill level of printing workers⁷¹.

There were other problems as well. The printing industry was unionized and on one occasion disrupted the publication schedule of the *Journal* through the threat of strike action (although voting to strike on the 13th of January, 1954, all the workers turned up for work the next morning)⁷². The major inconvenience was the uncertainty that the strike produced in the months preceding the vote. As Gibson-Hill noted it “wasted our time, but never took place.”⁷³ Of much more concern was the disruption of electrical supply between the years 1951 and 1953. The rapid growth of Singapore in the years following the Pacific War meant that the colony’s capacity to generate electricity needed to be increased proportionally. This did not take place. Prior to the war electricity was provided by a single plant, St. James Station, which even by 1940 was seen as inadequate due to its

age. By 1950 the *Straits Times* reported that it was running on “second-hand boilers and turbo-alternators” with no reserve capacity if breakdowns or even regular maintenance was conducted.⁷⁴ Thus it was that over the next two years Singapore suffered daily blackouts as equipment was taken offline for repairs or maintenance.⁷⁵ Only at the end of 1952, after completion of a second power plant at Pasir Panjang did the fear of blackouts subside.⁷⁶

The blackouts affected the operation of the presses and slowed the production of the journal both by direct delays due to work stoppages, but also through an increased number of mistakes that needed attention⁷⁷ and had long-standing negative effects on the journal’s schedule. Gibson-Hill lamented that it would take “a year before we are straight again.”⁷⁸ This was over-optimistic. All of the issues for 1953 were published in 1954 while only two of the 1954 issues came in on time, and that was with the help of the Government Printer which had been enlisted in an effort to get *JMBRAS* back on track. Neither was 1955 a better year. Three out of the four issues planned were published a year later than they should have been and the following years only saw the backlog grow. By 1960 the annual report of the Society noted that 15 issues had not been published with none for the years 1959 and 1960, despite four local printers being involved in the effort to catch up.⁷⁹ At this point though, the tardiness of the journal was not entirely the fault of the printers or the contributors. The editor himself was slowing down as we shall see in the next section.

Editors

We come finally to the centre of the web, the editor of the *JMBRAS*, Gibson-Hill. He was the one who dealt with printers, contributors, and readers, mediating between each. All had to go through him to participate as a member of the journal’s community. His influence on the nature of the journal was therefore great and hence much of the blame for its troubles at the end of the decade and continuing until his death in 1963 falls on him, but as we have seen, many of the other strands of the web holding the community were also worn down by this time making his task much more difficult.

Born on the 23rd of October, 1911 at Newcastle upon Tyne in the United Kingdom, Gibson-Hill was from an early age interested in natural history, especially ornithology, and photography. He studied medicine at Cambridge and in 1938 accepted the offer of a job as medical doctor for a phosphate company working on Christmas Island. Traveling overland through Asia, Gibson-Hill arrived in Singapore towards the end of 1938 where he met Frederick Nutter Chasen, the director of the Raffles Museum. Chasen enrolled him as a collector for the museum, as Christmas Island had a relatively unexplored flora and fauna at the time. Later he moved to Cocos-Keeling Island to work as a doctor for Cable & Wireless at their station on the island. Here again he collected and wrote about the native fauna. Captured by the Japanese he spent the war years interned at Changi prison, Singapore. A few years after the war he joined the staff of the Museum as Assistant Curator of Zoology at the Raffles Museum and began his association with *JMBRAS* and its community of contributors, printers and readers.⁸⁰

As *JMBRAS* editor Gibson-Hill was extremely concerned that the contents of the journal contain no mistakes. He criticized the earlier *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* for not always adhering to this norm.⁸¹ In his correspondence with contributors he was at pains to note that “he was truly anxious that we should be correct

in all matters”⁸² and that “there is the broad, constant principle that errors should be avoided.”⁸³ When he did allow mistakes to get by him he was remorseful, writing on one occasion “I have slipped up rather badly on this ... I was rushed at Christmas and contented myself with correcting his spelling, his use of capitals and italics, writing punctuation and trying to get some uniformity into his citations and placenames.”⁸⁴ But Gibson-Hill was also over-extended. In 1958 he held three positions on the Society’s Council: President, Secretary and Editor and throughout the 1950s he was responsible for at least two positions (either Secretary or President, as well as Editor). At his full-time job, he was short-staffed having only one other person to help with day-to-day management of the museum when it was supposed to have “at least four”⁸⁵ and the museum itself produced two journals, the *Raffles Bulletin of Zoology* and *Memoirs of the Raffles Museum* of which he was also the editor. To crown all these demands on his time, he was also heavily involved in the local photographic and artistic communities. And after 1956 he was increasingly a sick man, victim of intermittent bouts of oedema, hospitalized for a period of time late in 1959, and suffering from diabetes by 1960.⁸⁶ He joked about his lack of free time: “the later survives only as a pleasant fiction. When people suggest uses for it, I feel that they should speak more reverently of the dead”⁸⁷, but the pressure of his commitments and his perfectionist nature was an unfortunate combination that combined with his illness to create serious problems both for himself and the *Journal*. The Society’s Council warned him about the delay and his duty to the membership and contributors⁸⁸ and he seems to have acutely felt the pressure he was under, writing that: “I have even less time, and more to do in it, than 18 months ago. And I am almost back to the same state of mind – except that I am now losing hope that things ever will be any better, anywhere.”⁸⁹ This was in 1955, long before the delay in journal publication reached its highest point – by 1960 the backlog confronting him amounted to almost four years worth of issues. As the delay mounted, his comments in the Society’s *Annual Report* clearly reflect his frustration at not being able to get more done, blaming the bad situation on “too many unnecessary letters to answer and too many redundant files to complete” and warning the members that it was this aspect of the job rather than the work itself that “was likely to bring his activities to an end.”⁹⁰ By the time of his death in 1963 he had, in the words of one commentator, left “the Society’s *Journal* in a state of chaos.”⁹¹

Conclusion

By the early 1960s, the *JMBRAS* was in a morbid state. The four strands of the web that sustained it as a community were in various states of decay. Readership was down to record lows, academic contributors were reluctant to submit articles because of the backlog waiting publication and the amateurs were, if not already departed from Malaya, mostly preparing to go. Neither could the printers really help arrest the declining fortunes of the *Journal* – low skill levels meant increased errors and more time wasted in the labourious process of corrections using the technology of the times. But the *Journal* and the Society did not perish. Under a series of new editors, but especially Mubin Sheppard who was in charge of the *Journal* from 1972 to 1995, the various strands of the community were strengthened so that by 2007 the Society could claim 642 ordinary members, 105 life members and 110 institutional members.⁹² Rather than producing

knowledge about Malaya for the British Empire, the Journal has transitioned into one that does so for the current post-colonial order in the region and globally.

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² D. McCracken, *Gardens of empire: botanical institutions of the Victorian British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997); S. Sheets-Pyenson, *Cathedrals of science: the development of colonial natural history museums during the late nineteenth century* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988); R. Chatterjee, *Empires of the mind: a history of the Oxford University Press in India under the Raj* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ J. Jose, Imperial Rule and the Ordering of Intellectual Space: The Formation of the Straits Philosophical Society, *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 12:2 (1998) 23-54; S. Naoki, The Malay world in textbooks: the transmission of colonial knowledge in British Malaya, *Southeast Asian Studies* 39:2 (2001) 188-234; M. Quilty, *Textual empires: a reading of early British histories of Southeast Asia* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash Asia Institute, 1998); A.J. Stockwell, The crucible of the Malayan nation: the university and the making of a new Malaya, 1938-62, *Modern Asian Studies* 43 (2009) 1149-1187.

⁴ C.M. Choy, History of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 68:2 (1995) 81-148.

⁵ J. Gullick, A short history of the Society, *JMBRAS* 68:2 (1995) 67-74.

⁶ J. Gullick, A short history of the Society, *JMBRAS* 68:2 (1995) 67-74.

⁷ The rest of this paragraph relies on Timothy Norman Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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⁹ Letter from J. Gullick to Gibson-Hill, 10/12/1953. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

¹⁰ Letter from F.H. Pearson to Gibson-Hill, 3/9/1955. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

¹¹ Letter from G. Marrison to Gibson-Hill, 28/10/1957. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

¹² Letter from G. Marrison to Gibson-Hill, 2/6/1959. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

¹³ Letter from G. Marrison to Gibson-Hill, 22/8/1958. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

- ¹⁴ Letter from H.R.C. Wright to Gibson-Hill, 6/11/1952. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ¹⁵ Letter from H.R.C. Wright to Gibson-Hill, 6/11/1952. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ¹⁶ Letter from R. Needham to Gibson-Hill, 5/10/1953. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ¹⁷ J. Heimann, *The most offending soul alive: Tom Harrisson and his remarkable life* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 326.
- ¹⁸ Letter from R. Needham to Gibson-Hill, 1/1/1954. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ¹⁹ Letter from R. Needham to Gibson-Hill, 27/5/1956. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ²⁰ Letter from R. Needham to Gibson-Hill, no date. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ²¹ Letter from G. Irwin to Gibson-Hill, 1/11/1955. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ²² Letter from N. Parkinson to Gibson-Hill, 15/8/1957. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ²³ Letter from J. Bastin to Gibson-Hill, 6/10/1953. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
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- ²⁷ Letter from R. Needham to Gibson-Hill, 10/4/1955. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ²⁸ Letter from P.E. Josselin de Jong to Gibson-Hill, 11/9/1956. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ²⁹ Letter from I. MacGregor to Gibson-Hill, 28/12/1954. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ³⁰ Letter from Gibson-Hill to W. Coolhaus, 2/8/1950. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ³¹ Letter from Gibson-Hill to R. Braddell, no date. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ³² Letter from Gibson-Hill to J. Gullick, 14/11/1952. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ³³ J.D. Legge, 'The writing of Southeast Asian history'. *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: from early time to c. 1500*, Nicholas Tarling, editor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 3-43.
- ³⁴ Letter from K. Treggonning to Gibson-Hill, 31/10/1958. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ³⁵ Letter from R. Needham to Lee, 16/11/1960. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

- ³⁶ Letter from P.E. Josselin de Jong to Lee, 25/11/1959). Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ³⁷ Annual Report of the MBRAS for 1960, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 34:1 (1961), vi-ix.
- ³⁸ Letter from M. Sheppard to Gibson-Hill, 22/11/1957. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
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- ⁴⁰ Letter from B. Gray to Gibson-Hill, 7/4/1954. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁴¹ Letter from P.L. Dickson to Gibson-Hill, 5/12/1955. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
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- ⁴³ Letter from E.L.S. Jennings to Gibson-Hill, 30/7/1959. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁴⁴ Letter from N. Ismail to Gibson-Hill, 28/4/1957. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁴⁵ Letter from J. Gullick to Gibson-Hill, 15/7/1953. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁴⁶ Letter from B. Mallal to Gibson-Hill, 23/10/1957. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
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- ⁴⁹ Letter from Gibson-Hill to H.P. Bryson, 25/6/1956. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁵⁰ Letter from Gibson-Hill to District Officer, Kinta, 27/8/1949. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁵¹ Letter from P.E. Josselin de Jong to Gibson-Hill, 20/12/1954. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁵² Letter from Gibson-Hill to P.E. Josselin de Jong, 23/12/1954. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁵³ Letter from Gibson-Hill to H.P. Bryson, 25/6/1956. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁵⁴ Letter from J. Gullick to Gibson-Hill, 6/1/54. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
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- ⁶⁷ Letter from Gibson-Hill to J. Gullick, 1/2/1954. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁶⁸ Letter from Gibson-Hill to J. Gullick, 20/2/1956. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁶⁹ Letter from Gibson-Hill to M. Topley, 13/9/1956. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
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- ⁸² Letter from Gibson-Hill to I. MacGregor, 11/7/55. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.
- ⁸³ Letter from Gibson-Hill to W. Coolhaus, 2/8/50. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

⁸⁴ Letter from Gibson-Hill to J. Gullick, 16/5/55. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

⁸⁵ Letter from Gibson-Hill to F.H. Pearson, 16/5/55. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

⁸⁶ Hodgson, 1965.

⁸⁷ Letter from Gibson-Hill to J. Gullick, 22/8/55. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

⁸⁸ Hodgson 1965.

⁸⁹ Letter from Gibson-Hill to F.H. Pearson, 16/5/1955. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

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