

Rafflesia

Rafflesiaceae

Rafflesia commemorates an English colonial administrator, oriental scholar and patron of sciences, Sir Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles (1781-1826), who founded Singapore in 1819 as a British colony (since 1965 the independent Republic of Singapore) and was also a founder and first president of the London Zoological Society (and the London Zoo). He joined the British East India Company in 1795 as a clerk and by 1811, following the forty-five day British invasion of Java, had risen to Lieutenant-Governor of Java (now part of Indonesia). After the return of Java to the Dutch he sailed back to England in 1816 and in 1817 was made Governor-General of Bengkulu, south-western Indonesian Sumatra (then Bencoolen) a post he held and administered until 1823. His early years here confirmed his appreciation that the British lacked a possession in the region of both economic and strategic importance (only the latter had been realised to that date) which could counter Dutch dominance. In February 1819 he partially secured the island of Singapore on behalf of his employers and a trading post was established (with limited military support) under the stricture that the Strait of Singapore (a potential gateway for trade with China and Japan) must remain open for shipping. Raffles returned to administering Bengkulu – and Singapore grew rapidly. But until 1824 and the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, an uneasy relationship with the Dutch continued throughout the area. Raffles' great interest in natural history caused him not only to employ botanists and zoologists to explore the region (often at his own expense), but also to moot the idea of a museum on Singapore in 1823. In 1849 the Raffles Museum of natural history and anthropology (today the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research) emerged, as also the resurrection of the Batavian Society (which studied natural history in the Java region) of which he became president. He sent animals (including tapirs, barking deer and rhinoceroses) to England, and kept some (such as a baby sun bear which was reared with his children) as pets. He also mentioned animals and plants in much of his correspondence, and sent about 1000 stuffed animals and skeletons to England, as well as some preserved in a solution of alcohol. In 1824 he returned home to England taking specimens of flora and fauna with him, together with scientific papers and drawings, all of which (including the family's worldly possessions and some original Malaysian manuscripts) were lost during a fire on board ship. Singapore's famous Raffles Hotel was not opened until over 50 years' after Raffles' death from a brain tumour on the eve of his 45th birthday. In 1817 he was knighted. Amongst his works were papers for the *Transactions of the Zoological Society* and he published *History of Java*. Despite his achievements historians describe him as bitter when he died. He had had an unsatisfactory relationship with the Company for most of his career, he and his family seem to have been beset with ill health and death, and in addition to the loss of their possessions he was relatively penniless when he died as he had lost any remaining capital in a bank failure in 1825. Today his name lives on all over the world not only in works of art but also in plant and animal scientific names and in the names of institutions (scientific, educational, sporting and recreational), businesses, landmarks and places.