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3rd MBRAS Lecture 2016

“Not So Mad: H.N. Ridley, Science and Colonial Society”

by Timothy P. Barnard

Function Room,
Singapore Botanic Garden,
Singapore

Saturday, 24 September 2016, 5.30 p.m.

Abstract

From 1888 until 1912, Henry Nicholas Ridley was the Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens and the leading colonial scientist in the Straits Settlements. Ridley oversaw the Botanic Gardens during an amazingly productive period when a number of plants, including rubber, were developed for the plantation economy. He also ventured into numerous other areas of scientific research that had a lasting impact on colonial society. When he left Singapore, however, he was a highly unpopular figure. Labelled “Mad” because of his passionate promotion of rubber cultivation in the early days of the rubber industry, he received little official recognition for the role that he played in transforming the economy and society of Malaya and the Straits Settlements. This talk will explore how Ridley became such a controversial figure, and how he fit into scientific and social communities in Singapore during the era of High Imperialism.

Timothy P. Barnard is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the National University of Singapore, where he specializes in the environmental and cultural history of island Southeast Asia. His research has focused on a range of topics including state formation in the eighteenth-century Straits of Melaka, Malay identity throughout history, Malay film in the 1950s, and the environmental history of Singapore. He has published numerous book chapters and articles, as well as the book *Multiple Centres of Authority* (KITLV, 2003) and the edited volumes *Contesting Malayness* (NUS Press, 2004) and *Nature Contained* (NUS Press, 2014). He has just completed a history of the Singapore Botanic Gardens entitled *Nature's Colony*, which will be launched in October 2016.

The Lecture

Dr. Tim Barnard presented a lecture on the well-known H.N. Ridley, credited as the “father” of the Malaysian rubber industry. The lecture was very entertaining as it provided those present with a view of colonial society from very unusual eyes. Ridley, who kept a diary and records of his work, was a meticulous observer of social affairs. Although he rose remarkably fast often aided by his patrons at Kew Gardens, his arrival in Singapore was not very well-received. He was, in terms of his youth and manners, quite out of place with the very conservative colonial administration.

Dr. Barnard's lecture provided an insight into a man who was dedicated to a particular scientific tradition encouraged from Kew and resisted at each port of call throughout the empire. It was a modern world view that had very little time for social graces and even less with stuffy traditions. In many ways, Ridley's promising start was a false one as he was never able to convert his remarkable talents into upward mobility. Once he lost the patronage of the governor, his was a career consigned to the fringes of colonial administration.

It was most appropriate that the lecture was given at the Singapore Botanical Gardens and the Society is grateful for the privilege of using its fine facilities. Dr. Barnard's lecture is based on his upcoming book on Ridley, which promises to be a definitive one. The lecture also showcases the strong connection between Singapore and Malaysia whereby Ridley is the protagonist. Having found very little avenue to advance his research and even fewer doors opened when he sought investments, it was his articles in the Straits Chinese Magazine – published in Singapore 1897–1907 – that provided the fillip for a new commercial agricultural industry built on rubber. His “herring-bone” tapping method would later make this into British Malaya's most profitable business.

Finally, the lecture event was made even more significant by the presence of Mr. Chan Sek Keong, the MBRAS' new Singapore patron. The recent appointment of Mr. Chan as patron was to fill the gap left vacant following the death in March 2015 of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, the former patron. Mr. Chan, the former Chief Justice of Singapore with an eminent reputation in legal circles, presented Dr. Barnard with a gift on behalf of the Society. We are sure that members who were able to attend had a most educational and entertaining time. Also sighted in the audience were historian Dr. Leon Comber, who at 95 was still thoroughly alert, and Mrs. Elisabeth Eber, the wife of the patron who was herself a lawyer of some repute.

