Timothy P. Barnard (ed.)


To say that this volume is about containing nature in Singapore is a serious understatement. Rather, it is about the transformation, categorization, and conceptualization of ‘nature’ and the environment in Singapore. Much of the book concerns debates about social and scholarly understandings of nature, and as such it might be said to be about the construction of nature, using ‘construction’ in both its full, post-modern sense and also taken more literally. Indeed most of the chapters do not focus on the common understanding of the environment or nature at all, but are about people and ideas: how the interaction between people, their ideas, and the environment have impacted upon each other. The story being told here goes far beyond mere containment, as handy as this word is in a title. It is more properly and more accurately characterized by the editor a few pages into the introduction as a study of the ‘historical relationship between humans and nature’ (p. 5), with as much interest in nature’s impact on humans as vice versa.

The book opens with an introduction by the editor, Timothy Barnard, followed by Tony Dempsey’s macro-historical survey of Singapore’s environment, which serves as something akin to a second introduction. After that strong opening, the structure becomes less intuitive, with the order of business very loosely reflecting the chronology of events, but in this review I have tried to consider them thematically rather than chronologically.

The conceptual core of the book is a series of chapters that are not obviously about ‘nature’ per se at all, but which together form the spine holding the scholarly framework together. A chapter by John van Wyhe on the Victorian naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace sits next to a chapter by Nigel P. Taylor on the history of the Botanical Gardens, and a couple of chapters later Timothy P. Barnard offers an account of the Raffles Museum, quoting in passing a letter
written to the local newspaper in 1965 complaining that the museum was ‘an example of what an inadequate museum looked like in 1935’ (p. 195). Together with Goh Hong Yi’s chapter on more contemporary environmental activism, these chapters place Singaporeans’ understanding of ‘nature’ firmly in the context of changing scholarly and popular fashions, understood as global—or at least western/imperial—phenomena.

If we do not include the dead animals in the museum, there are three chapters on the dramatic interactions between humans and animals: Chapter 2 on wild tigers in the nineteenth century; Fiona Tan’s chapter on the colonial trade in exotic fauna; and Goh Hong Yi’s chapter, which deals substantially with the modern illegal trade in wild animals and birds, to which the government long turned a blind eye.

Agriculture per se rightly receives serious attention. To those with just superficial knowledge of Singapore it may be surprising to learn that as recently as 1980 Singapore enjoyed a very high level of food security. At that point it was self-sufficient (or very nearly so) in a wide range of foodstuffs, but the government deliberately turned its back on farming, preferring to use land for industry, urban development, and other ‘modern’ activities that it held in sharp contrast to the ‘quaint’ way of life enjoyed by ‘the peasant’ (p. 284). Cynthia Chou’s chapter tells this story, along with a gripping account of the vital role played by farmers throughout the colonial period and particularly that of family farms during the Japanese Occupation.

Yet agriculture went far beyond family farms. The nineteenth century pepper and gambier plantations were fully fledged industrial-scale enterprises that delivered much of colonial Singapore’s economic and social life blood, and then provided the template for the exploitation of Johor. They were also agents of change that ultimately denuded much of Singapore’s jungle, drained its soil of nutrients, and exposed much of the population to the hazard of tigers. When the pepper and gambier phase of colonial Singapore’s economy was over, new agricultural pursuits beckoned—but needed activist leadership from government, entrepreneurs, scientists, and amateur enthusiasts to have a chance of success. The attempt to build a nutmeg industry failed (p. 116), as did attempts to farm cotton, coffee, cocoa, and pineapples (p. 222), but using technology and techniques developed at the Botanic Gardens, local rubber plantations (not just those on the peninsula) became a major contributor to Singapore’s economy (pp. 42, 43) in the first half of the twentieth century (pp. 123, 124).

This is so much more than a book on the environment. It is a social history, rich in the stories of ordinary people, some of whom made extraordinary contributions to their societies. Alfred Wallace gets a chapter of his own, but there are other colourful characters. Henry Ridley, a nineteenth century Director of
the Botanic Gardens features in several chapters. He used to routinely carry handfuls of rubber seeds in his coat pockets, hoping to find someone interested in planting them. Eventually Tan Chay Yan, a tapioca plantation owner from Malacca, accepted the challenge, and this is how Malaya’s and Singapore’s rubber industry began (p. 124).

If this book has a weakness it is that the pace and tone of its chapters are very uneven. The inclusion between the chapters of extensive snippets from primary sources exaggerates this impression. This is partly an unavoidable consequence of the range of the content, but it does underline the fact that the book is very much targeted at students and scholars, despite the presence of a few chapters that could properly be described as a ‘rattling good read’.

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