

BIRDS OF THE MALAY PENINSULA

Title: *The Birds of the Malay Peninsula: A General Account of the Birds Inhabiting the Region from the Isthmus of Kra to Singapore with the Adjacent Islands*

Authors: Herbert C. Robinson (Vols. 1–3), Frederick N. Chasen (Vols. 3–4), Lord Medway (Vol. 5), David R. Wells (Vol. 5)

Year published: Vol. 1 (1927), Vol. 2 (1928), Vol. 3 (1936), Vol. 4 (1939), Vol. 5 (1976)

Publisher: H. F. & G. Witherby (London)

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(Left) From top: A mature Malay Glossy Starling, an immature Malay Glossy Starling and the Buffalo Mynah. *All rights reserved, Robinson, H. C. (1927). The Birds of the Malay Peninsula (Vol. I). London: H. F. & G. Witherby.*

(Right) Volume V of *The Birds of the Malay Peninsula*. This book in the series is titled "Conclusion, and Survey of Every Species" (1976) and was written by Lord Medway and David R. Wells. *Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

(Bottom right) Published in 1928, Volume II in the series is titled "The Birds of the Hill Stations" and written by Herbert C. Robinson. *Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.*

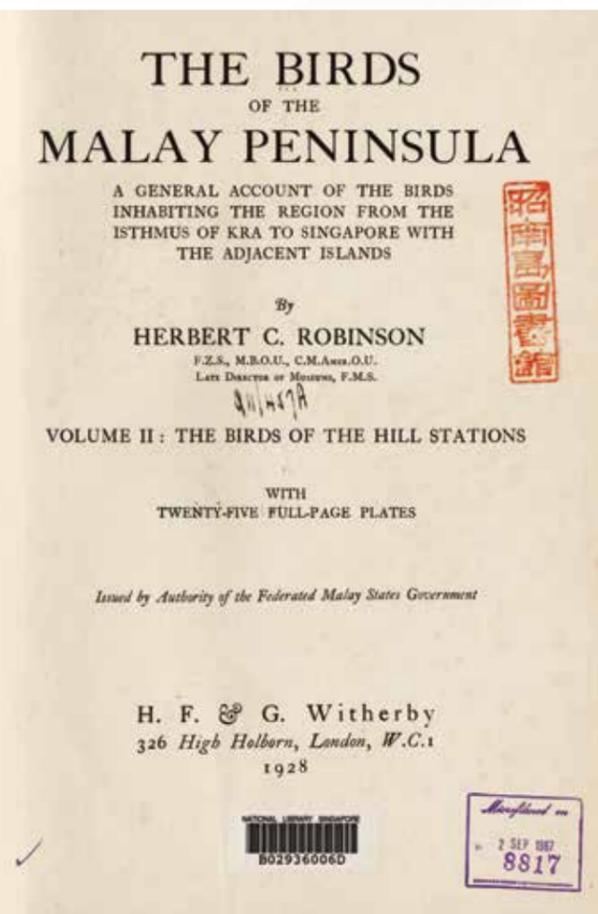
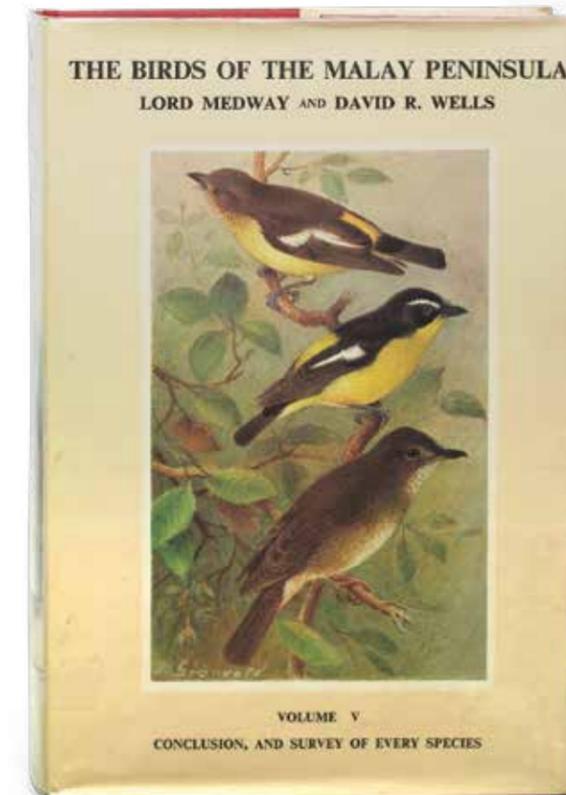
The series of books, which has been endorsed by the global ornithology community, is an ambitious body of work that contains comprehensive scientific descriptions of the birds of the Malay Peninsula. Accompanied by rich and vibrant illustrations of the region's birdlife, the series was authored by four British naturalists – Herbert C. Robinson (1874–1929), Frederick N. Chasen (1896–1942), Lord Medway and David R. Wells.

Until these volumes were published, research works on the region's birdlife were considered unsatisfactory.¹ The series is even more remarkable when one considers the fact that its authors researched and compiled its contents over the span of almost 50 years, all this while combing the thick, impenetrable Malayan jungles to document the 700 bird species that inhabit the region.²

The accounts contain the birds' Latin, English and Malay names, as well as detailed descriptions of their soft parts, dimensions, the areas they inhabit in the Malay Peninsula and their habits. In 1928, the American ornithology community praised the publication's "scope and method of treatment [as] admirable and the finely printed plates most satisfactory".³

Although the production of the series hit several snags – with the last volume published only in 1976, some 37 years after volume 4 was printed – it kept going due to the deep interest in the avifauna of the Malay Peninsula. The timing too could not have been better: the British ornithologists who embarked on the project started their work at a time when the region's forests were just beginning to deteriorate, much to the alarm of conservationists.

In 1921, the originator of the series, Herbert C. Robinson – a specialist in the birds and mammals of Malaya – pointed out that commercial timber exploitation could irreparably alter the character of the region's primeval forests and profoundly affect the fauna.⁴ Robinson, who managed to get the financial backing of the



Much has been written about the history of the Malay Peninsula and its people. Far less would have been known about the region's birds, if not for an extensive five-volume series painstakingly compiled by four ornithologists between 1927 and 1976.

Titled *The Birds of the Malay Peninsula: A General Account of the Birds Inhabiting the Region from the Isthmus of Kra to Singapore with the Adjacent Islands* and accompanied by detailed maps and illustrated plates, the first volume of the series is titled "The Commoner Birds" (1927). The subsequent four volumes are: "The Birds of the Hill Stations" (1928); "Sporting Birds: Birds of the Shore and Estuaries" (1936); "The Birds of the Low-Country Jungle and Scrub" (1939); and "Conclusion, and Survey of Every Species" (1976).



(Above) From top: Tail feathers of the Common or Fantail Snipe, Chinese or Swinhoe's Snipe and the Pintail Snipe. All rights reserved, Robinson, R. C., & Chasen, F. N. (1936). *The Birds of the Malay Peninsula* (Vol. III). London: H. F. & G. Witherby.

(Right) From top: Heads of the Bushy-Crested Hornbill, Malaysian Wreathed Hornbill, Wrinkled Hornbill, Long-crested Hornbill and Helmeted Hornbill. All rights reserved, Robinson, H. C. (1928). *The Birds of the Malay Peninsula* (Vol. II). London: H. F. & G. Witherby.



Federated Malay States (FMS) government, then wrote the first two volumes (published in 1927 and 1928 respectively). The series was planned for release at half-yearly intervals⁵ but Robinson died in 1929. The work was resumed by Frederick N. Chasen – the first curator of the Raffles Museum⁶ – who completed volumes 3 (1936) and 4 (1939), and outlined his plans for volume 5 in the preface to the fourth volume.

By 1942, preparation for the final volume was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II in Malaya. Chasen tragically drowned when the ship he was travelling on board was sunk by the Japanese days before the fall of Singapore. Chasen's house is said to have been looted after he left, but the Raffles Museum remained intact throughout the war, although no sign of the manuscript was ever to be found.⁷

Interest in continuing with the final volume was revived more than 20 years later. In 1948, when a new introductory publication on Malayan birds was released, the first four volumes were already out of print.⁸ By 1958, the series had become a collector's item.⁹ After the war, Edward

Banks, the former curator of the Sarawak Museum, wrote a replacement text for the final volume and deposited it in the British Museum (Natural History).¹⁰ In 1964, Ken Scriven, a long-time resident of Malaysia and ardent collector of Malayan birdlife,¹¹ chanced upon not only Banks's text but also the coloured plates created by H. Gronvold in London. He shared the discovery with fellow naturalists Lord Medway (Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy, also known as the 5th Earl of Cranbrook) and David R. Wells, who in turn completed the series.

H. F. & G. Witherby, the publisher of volumes 1 to 4, also produced the fifth volume, taking pains to use the same typesetting, paper and layout that had been used in previous volumes. In 1976, the last volume was finally published.¹²

♦ Nor-Afidah Abdul Rahman

Notes

- 1 Robinson's "The Birds of the Malay Peninsula". (1928). *The AUK: A quarterly Journal of Ornithology*, XLV, 240.
- 2 Malayan birds. (1927, August 16). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (1884–1942), p. 14. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

- 3 *The AUK*, 1928, pp. 239–240.
- 4 Wells, J. K. (2005). *Nature and nation: Forests and development in Peninsular Malaysia* (p. 170). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. Call no.: RSEA 333.75095951 KAT
- 5 Koss, C. B. (1928, January 17). The birds of the Malay Peninsula. *The Straits Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 6 National Library Board. (2013, March 15). *Frederick Nutter Chasen* written by Tan, Fiona. Retrieved from Singapore Infopedia.
- 7 McClure, E. (1977, September). The Birds of the Malay Peninsula, Vol. 5 by Lord Medway, David R. Wells [review]. *The Wilson Bulletin*, 89(3), 497–498. Retrieved from JSTOR; Tweedy, M. W. F. (1946, October). Obituary: Frederick Nutter Chasen. *Ibis*, 88(4), 527. Retrieved from Wiley Online Library; National Library Board, 15 Mar 2013.
- 8 Malayan birds. (1948, January 11). *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 9 McClure, Sep 1977, p. 498.
- 10 Robertson, D. G. (1978). Review of "The Birds of the Malay Peninsula, Volume V: conclusion, and survey of every species". *Emu*, 78(1), 46–47.
- 11 WWF. (2010, May 21). *Malaysia conservation leaders honoured with WWF international awards*. Retrieved from WWF website.
- 12 McClure, Sep 1977, pp. 497–498.

LEGENDS OF THE MALAY KINGS

Title: *Malay Annals (Sejarah Melayu)*
Author: John Leyden (1775–1811), with an introduction by Stamford Raffles (1781–1826)
Year published: 1821
Publisher: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown (London)
Language: English
Type: Book; 361 pages
Call no.: RRARE959.503 MAL
Accession no.: B02633069G

Title: *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)*
Author: William Girdlestone Shellabear (1862–1948)
Year published: 1898
Publisher: American Mission Press (Singapore)
Language: Romanised Malay
Type: Book; 190 pages
Call no.: RRARE 9.51 SEJ
Accession no.: B20025340E

(Below) John Leyden (1775–1811) translated the Jawi text of the *Sejarah Melayu* into English in 1821. This is the earliest English translation of the epic work. All rights reserved, Bastin, J. (2002). *Olivia Mariamne Raffles*. Singapore: Landmark Books.

(Right) *Sejarah Melayu* includes an introduction by Stamford Raffles and was used as a study aid to groom British scholar-administrators in the colonial service. Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.



The *Sejarah Melayu* is considered by scholars as an important literary work on the history and genealogy of the Malay kings of the Melaka Sultanate (1400–1511). Written sometime between the 15th and 16th centuries in Jawi – the modified Arabic script used to express the Malay language – the title is derived from its original Arabic name, *Sulalat al-Salatin (Genealogy of Kings)*.¹ But few are aware that its first English translation in the early 19th century, the *Malay Annals*, was actually undertaken by a Scotsman.

His name was John Leyden, a close friend of the founder of modern Singapore, Stamford Raffles, and a prominent figure

of the Scottish Enlightenment movement of the late 18th century.² The book, published in 1821, is the earliest English translation of the epic work, and opened up the world of Malay history and literature to 19th-century colonial scholars. In some ways, the book was so revolutionary that it overshadowed the handwritten Jawi manuscript, as well as the printed Jawi version by the learned scholar Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (also known as Munsyi Abdullah), published 20 years later.³ In fact, the popular use of the translated title "Malay Annals" and the original "Sejarah Melayu" may be attributed to Leyden as both were likely coined in his translation.⁴

