

# William Farquhar's Drawings

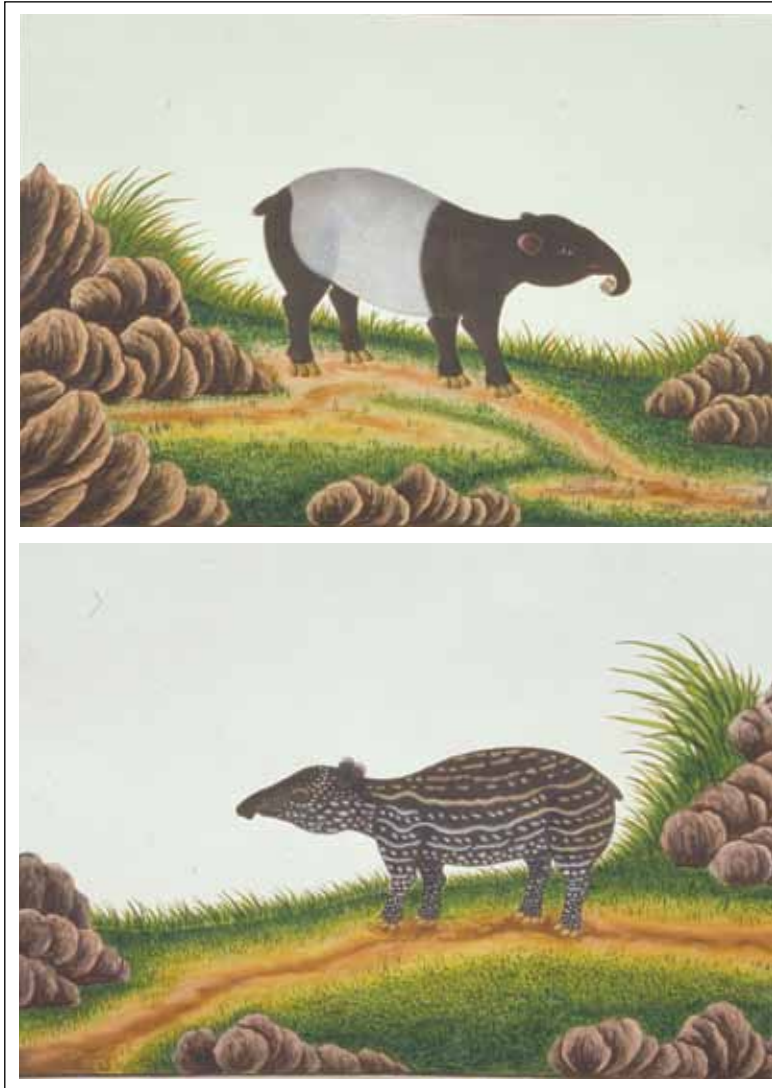
By Janice Montgomery

When one thinks of Singapore's colonial era the images that spring to mind are of adventures in an exotic land, when the lure of new discoveries was still exciting and exploration took on an economic purpose, with enterprising traders hoping to make a fortune in a new settlement. This was the time when spices such as pepper and nutmeg were as valuable as gold.

The colonial explorers' quest to discover and document all that was different is beautifully illustrated in the original collection of Natural History Drawings commissioned by William Farquhar during his time as Resident and Commandant of Malacca (1803 - 1818). Many drawings from the collection are displayed in the Goh Seng Choo Gallery at the National Museum. They provide a glimpse into a period when many of the plants and animals which were drawn were new and wondrous to the rest of the world. They record the new species, unusual plants, fruits, animals and birds of the Malay Peninsula in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and give an idea of what Singapore's natural habitat might have been like.

The collection represents the spirit of discovery displayed by many colonial explorers from the period, such as Alfred Russel Wallace, Sir Stamford Raffles and William Marsden, who despite not being trained in natural history, were all keen to undertake scientific exploration, recording what they saw and found, as well as documenting the habitats, local names and uses of plants.

Imagine being the first to encounter and describe a new species like the Malayan tapir; to raise one from infancy in your home and record its habits and growth. Consider the



*Tapirus indicus, Malayan Tapir. Farquhar discovered the Malayan tapir, and in 1816 sent his description, drawing and skull of the species to the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The publication of his account, however, took four years and as a result, he was beaten to first publication by the French zoologist Anselme Desmarest. The drawings depict both an adult (top) and baby (bottom) tapir. Farquhar reared a baby tapir in his residence, noting it to be rather fond of feeding off bread and cakes from his dinner table. Photos courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore*

exhilaration of being the first recorded European to climb Mount Ophir and discover a new species of fern. William Farquhar wanted to share all the diverse, new and exotic things he discovered with his peers and colleagues. He sent specimens, descriptions and drawings to them and to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, adding to the understanding of the natural history of the region. This unfortunately resulted in many of Farquhar's discoveries being claimed by others.

At the time, drawings were the only way to document the flora and fauna of the region. No cameras were available and plant specimens often did not survive the long sea voyage to be cultivated, drawn or dissected by skilled botanists. For animals it was more difficult still and often only skulls, bones, hides or stuffed specimens were transported for scientific evaluation.

We are indebted to Farquhar, who commissioned local artists to record what he discovered for science and posterity. To find and employ local artists

that were skilled enough to paint his specimens must have been quite a challenge. One can also imagine the difficulty he must have had in teaching them to produce scientific documentation accurately rather than drawing an impression of beauty. The artistic detail and the skill they exhibited in capturing the beautiful colors associated with the plants and birds of the region are clearly visible in the works that we can see today.

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