Borneo to Philadelphia

The Furness-Hiller-Harrison Collections

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In the years 1895-1903 William H. Furness 3rd, Hiram M. Hiller, and Alfred C. Harrison, Jr., (Fig. 1) traveled extensively in Asia and the Pacific, making zoological and ethnographic collections for the University of Pennsylvania. The largest of these collections was made in 1896-1898 on the island of Borneo. The University Museum Archives contain Hiller’s Borneo journals and copies of his letters from the years 1895-1901. The following account is drawn primarily from these journals and letters.

Preparations

William Henry Furness 3rd (1868-1920) was a member of the socially prominent Philadelphia family that included the Shakespearean scholar Horace Howard Furness (his father) and the architect Frank Furness (his uncle). After taking his degree from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1891 and completing his residency at the University Hospital, Bill Furness took time off in the spring of 1893 to accompany a patient on a trip to Japan. When he returned, Furness was “tattooed artistically down to the waist” (Fig. 2). He brought back with him 19 large cases of “curios,” and

1 “All three men are young, well-to-do and filled with a desire for knowledge and excitement” (Philadelphia newspaper, 23 Dec. 1898). Collectors Hiram Milliken Hiller (standing, left), William Henry Furness 3rd (standing, near right), and Alfred Craven Harrison, Jr. (standing, far right), with Furness’s assistant Lewis Etzel (seated). (Photograph taken in Singapore in 1898; reproduced courtesy of Hiller’s grand-nephew, Hiram M. Hiller)
what was to prove to be an enduring enthusiasm for Eastern travel (Harvard Class Report, 1894).

When Furness proposed a collecting expedition whose ultimate destination was the island of Borneo, his choice for a companion was his medical school classmate and friend, Hiram Millicent Hiller (1872-1921), son of a banker from Kalakaua, Missouri. Hiller had followed his residency with a year of study in Europe. In 1894 he returned to practice in Philadelphia, taking a post as surgeon at the Howard Medical College. The following year, he gave up this position to travel with Furness.

On their way to the Malay Archipelago, the two young men explained the planned eight-month expedition on which they were embarked was a strictly private one. The goal was to make collections for the University of Pennsylvania. According to a Philadelphia newspaper (ca. 28 October 1895), they sought “to secure the most perfect collection possible; money will really not be an object to deter them from picking up articles or making an extended search for them.” Borneo posed a particular challenge: “They intend making a journey across Borneo and as much of the country has not been visited by a white man the trip is fraught with considerable danger — They will have a siege of rough life such as they have never experienced before.”

It was to be several months before they reached their destination. In Yokohama, Furness purchased a schooner and added two more recruits to the party: James Austin Wilder, a fellow Harvard man ready to drop everything for an adventure, and Lewis Ettel, hired as a hunter and as second mate on the schooner. Some weeks were spent exploring and making collections in Japan’s Luchu (Ryukyu) Islands, after which Furness decided to discontinue the schooner. By the end of April the four men finally reached Singapore and outfitted themselves for Borneo with all the necessary equipment, for bullets, keg of powder, rubber blankets, mattress, rope, pillow, bags of alcohol for specimens, pounds of arsenic — etc., etc., bought of “B. & Co. — I know more about Borneo than anybody” (Appell 1968:451-456).

Furness and Hiller in Sarawak, 1896

By May 6, 1896, the party was on a steamer heading up the Sarawak River to Kuching (Fig. 3), seat of the government of the second British Rajah of Sarawak, Charles Brooke (see Brown, this issue). Furness and Hiller carried a special introduction to Brooke, and as soon as they were in Kuching they cooperated on the river to his residence for an audience, “We spent,” reported Hiller, “a pleasant twenty minutes in which we discussed all our plans, the Rajah willingly consenting to them all.”

Charles Hose, the Rajah’s Resident Officer in the Barum district who was then on leave in Kuching, immediately took charge of the Americans. Himself an avid ethnographic and zoological collector (see box), Hose arranged for the hiring of Dayak hunters, Furness, and Lewis Ettel, along with a Chinese coolie and one Malay “boy” apiece, moved into the rented bungalow that was to be their base in Kuching for the next two and a half months.

When the peacocking was over, Furness and Hiller decided to make a trip into the upland Kayan and Kayan longhouses. Hose loaned them a canoe and entrusted them to the care of Tama Bulan, who was returning home to a tributary of the Barum called the Pata River.

This was Hose’s first excursion by Dayak canoe, a mode of travel with which they were to become very familiar. They found the river well-furnished with its grim side; the party carried “grappes” with them up the river and the trip was relatively uneventful, but the whole Hillear counted it “the finest trip we have yet taken.” From the Pata the party descended down the hill to the banks of the Pata, where they made brief visits to several other longhouses, and on the way secured several ethnographic specimens at longhouses on the Pata and the Apal, but bought especially heavily at Tama Bulan’s, where when they asked about artifacts they found themselves “in the midst of a regular bargain day at Wau-nanakus.”[2] The chief and some of his men contributed shields, spears, and blow-pipes, and Hose bought “right & left & feeling under obligations to the men for bringing up we did not haggle with our old friends on the prices.”

After a month upriver, Furness and Hiller rejoined Wilder and Ettel at Baram Fort, and everyone returned to Kuching. The four men moved back into their bungalow, and Furness and Ettel left almost immediately for a trip to the Sadong. Two weeks later they returned, after which Hiller summed up as “a disagreeable but successful stay. They brought down 200 Ethnological and Natural history specimens [sic] — but had a dreadful time with our Malay boy and were utterly disgusted with the Land Dayaks with whom they dealt.”

At this point the Americans were preparing to “close down the Kuching show,” and everyone was busy with taxidermy, writing, cataloguing, and packing. Hiller surveyed the town with nostalgia: “True boxes of birds & animals, trunks, gun, Etc. strew the house & pets & show & monkeys thence but we have been comfortable all the same.”

In August, the group dispersed. While Furness and Ettel went back to the Barum, Hiller went up the Brunei River, venturing far into the interior but collecting comparatively little. After a short trip he headed back to the Baram River where he found that Furness had been taking photographs, which he described as “disagreeable, brilliantly,” and had acquired many ethnographic specimens to fill gaps in the collections they had already made. While Hiller and Hose worked at “copying notes of native customs” (Fig. 4), and collecting, drying, and mounting poisons and medicines, Furness and Ettel made one last trip, traveling down the Barum, up the Bakong, overland to the Sibutu...
A page from Hiller's journal (Pata River, June 16, 1896). At right, sketches of heavy ear ornaments worn by Kengay women. At bottom, sketches of the tattoo patterns on a Kengay woman's hands and forearms. Furness, Hiller, and Harrison all kept notes and journals during their travels, but for the Borneo years only Hiller's journals survive. (University Museum Archives)

Preparations for a Second Expedition

Back in Philadelphia, Hiller resumed his position at the Howard Medical College, and struggled to make ends meet. Through a friend, however, another opportunity for travel soon presented itself. Alfred Craven Harrison, Jr., (1869-1955)

Hiller and Harrison in Dutch Borneo, 1897-1898

In September of 1897, Hiller and Harrison were in Dutch West Borneo, traveling up the Kapuas River to Sintang. Their goal in this expedition was primarily the collection of zoological material. Hiller wrote, “I finally got hunters, taught some men to skin, got the animal out to filling with reptiles and animals, the box to swelling with skins and skeletons... So many birds and small animals that they stayed in Sintang for about a month superintending preparation of the growing collection.”

In November they moved on upriver, to the last Dutch outpost on the Kapuas. They were waiting for the Kapuas to rise, as they had been kept up in the rain for almost a month. On November 10th, they arrived at the town of Tegang, and began their exploration of the area. Two months later, they reached Tegang again, and set up housekeeping in a longhouse and spent the next few days photographing and ethnographic collection. A W. Niewenhuys had visited the Mandala the year before, and the results of this expedition were published in 1899. (Fig. 7) During this time, Hiller was negotiating with the Dutch Resident in Pontianak for permission to ascend a tributary of the Sibau and cross over the watershed to a tributary of the Rejang in Sarawak. As Hiller assured his mother, the trip was not unlike the one that he and Furness had made from the Pata to the Apoh the year before. It was, however, much longer and more rigorous, the trek to the watershed alone taking 14 days. It also involved going from Dutch West Borneo to Sarawak, thus fulfilling Furness and Hiller’s original ambition of crossing the island. From the watershed, the party descended a series of small streams to the Belah, and down the Rejang to the sea. From Sarawak, Hiller and Harrison traveled to Singapore, where they met Furness. The three had planned to return together to Dutch Borneo, but in response to news about the outbreak of hostilities in the Philippines, Furness decided to go home. Thus Hiller and Harrison alone sailed from Singapore to Batangus, where they obtained permits from the Dutch resident to travel up the Mahakam River as far as the rapids at Atan. They then proceeded to the mouth of the Mahakam where they called on the Sultan of Kutei in his “palace” at Lagingrang. In 1899, although control of the area was effectively in the hands of the Dutch, the Sultan of Kutei still held concessions on salt, bird’s nests, gaffa percha, and rattan along the Mahakam, and his influence extended upstream in many subtle ways. It was taken for granted that the Sultan would ascend the Mahakam in launch sent from the Sultan, and make most of their trip in the company of a bodyguard identified as the “fourth son of the Sultan,” as he made rounds on the Sultan’s business.

Americans found themselves at a disadvantage: “prices are awful and we are compelled to bargain like a Chinese trader to get anything at a decent price. When Niewenhuys was here he spoiled these people paying any price they demanded evidently. Nevertheless, they bought a great deal, and Harrison took many photographs. This was Harrison’s first extended stay in a longhouse and Hiller noted with amusement that “his journal fairly rocks with descriptions and drawings.”

Hiller and Harrison stayed in Putus Bina for two months altogether, making short trips to Tegang’s house and to some Kanti houses
The Significance of the Ethnographic Collection

To this day, there are not many Bornean ethnographic collections in the United States, and the Furness-Hillier-Harrison collection is among the earliest and, with over 2,000 catalogued entries, one of the largest. Only the William Louis Abbott collection, acquired in Dutch Borneo between 1906 and 1915 for the Smithsonian Institution, is of comparable size. The University Museum's Borneo collection has the added strength of ethnic diversity, having been the object of a large number of different tribal peoples on both sides of the island. The people most comprehensively represented are the Kenyah, Kayan, Iban, and Kantu.

What Furness, Hillier, and Harrison set out to accomplish was to acquire the most complete possible assemblage of specimens from the widest possible range of peoples. Similarly, the stated rationale for their subsequent years of travel and collecting was the exploration of the racial origins of the peoples of Borneo. These trips have Borneo for the collector, and were so arranged because Dr. Fur-

Later Adventures of Furness, Hillier and Harrison

In the years following their expeditions to Borneo, the Furness-Hillier-Harrison team continued to make collecting trips to several other Asian and Oceanic aboriginal groups, the Veddas of Ceylon and the Nagas of Assam (Furness et al. 1890-1900), the Ainos of Japan and the Mentawaians (Sumatra) (Hillier and Harrison 1901), and the natives of the Caroline Islands, in the Gilberts (1903). The only zoological collections, from Sumatra, were presented to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. All the ethnographic collections were presented to The University Museum.

Museum, probably sometime in the 1930s. Over the years, the zoological collections of the Wistar Institute have gradually been dispersed. Most of the Furness-Hiller-Harrison specimens were the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, beginning with the sale of hundreds of bird skins in 1911. Some primate skeletal material has been transferred to The University Museum.

Arrival of the Collections in Philadelphia

On the afternoon of his return to Philadelphia after the first Borneo journey, Furness gave an interview describing his efforts to the first visit to the University Museum, adding that the "large and valuable collection will now be housed in the University museum" (Philadelphia Ledger, 5 December 1886). At that time, the Department of Archaeology and Palaontology of the University, which served the functions of a university museum, still had no building of its own, so when the collections did arrive, both ethnographic and zoological specimens were sent to the Wistar Institute.

Some parts of the collections had actually reached Wistar before Furness left Borneo, and one box in particular created a considerable stir. It was described in "a very peculiar manner," and was smudged with blood. The Wistar directors gave it to the curator and ordered it to be opened. Dr. Greenman ripped the cover from the box to reveal, wrapped in bloodstained rag, what appeared to be a human head. "It's Furness," he yelled, while the others gasped as they looked closer and saw the pale face and bloody neck of what was supposed to be the decapitated head of Dr. Furness. "When they calmed down, everyone agreed that the dummy head, made for Furness by a Dayak in Borneo, was "an excellent counterfeit," bearing a great resemblance to the man and including a remarkable imitation of the arteries and veins as they actually appear in a human body (Philadelphia Inquirer, 15 April 1897).

In May the ethnological collections were opened for inspection at a week-long public exhibition, invitations to the opening reception being issued jointly by the Wistar Institute and the Department of Archaeology and Palaeontology. Furness was not able to work on the exhibit, since he had been laid low by "a persistent and severe return of the old Borneo jungle fever," but Hillier helped to pack and organize the specimens. Stewart Culin, Curator of Asia and General Ethnography, set up the exhibition. He also, with the collector's help, wrote a long article for the Philadelphia Times which described in detail the remarkable objects that were on display (9 May 1887).

When the second installment of Borneo collections arrived at Penn in the summer of 1887, the first wing of a separate museum building was just being completed. Pending the move into the new building, however, the collections were again sent to the Wistar Institute where a temporary exhibit of ethnographic material took place in July 1889. In December, the new Free Museum of Science and Art was formally opened, with the Furness-Hillier-Harrison collections housed in the lower half of the Fitch Pavilion (now the Mesoamerican Gallery).

Furness, Hillier, and Harrison were in Assam, but friends sent them pictures and enthusiastic descriptions of Cain's display in the "Borneo Room" (Fig. 8). Harrison wrote that "it gives us all the greatest amount of pleasure and of great success that Cain has had in arranging and displaying our Borneo collection and we are anxious to see it in its permanent home." It does not seem that many of the three collectors was involved in studying or working with the Borneo material after it reached Philadelphia. By the fall of 1903, Hillier and Harrison were both in the sugar business in Cuba. Furness was associated with the Museum, as a member (later Secretary) of the Board of Managers, and as Curator of the General Ethnology section (Culin had resigned earlier in the year). Furness's title as curator was largely honorary, however, and the day-to-day work of the section fell to the newly appointed Assistant Curator, George Byron Gordon.

Most of the Borneo ethnographic collections were presented to The University Museum. A small number of duplicates were, however, set aside and consulted by the Department of Archaeology and Palaeontology. Furness was not able to work on the exhibit, since he had been laid low by "a persistent and severe return of the old Borneo jungle fever," but Hillier helped to pack and organize the specimens. Stewart Culin, Curator of Asia and General Ethnography, set up the exhibition. He also, with the collector's help, wrote a long article for the Philadelphia Times which described in detail the remarkable objects that were on display (9 May 1887).
ness, having found a peculiar people in Borneo, drew a circle about them in his explorations, hoping to connect them with some other races about which more is known” (Boston Sunday Globe, 16 December 1906). Thus, according to accounts in various Philadelphia newspapers, they visited the Naga tribes “to trace to its source the remarkable culture which exists today among the wild tribes of Borneo,” the Menangkebun “to discover whether they are, as is claimed, the parent stock of the Malay race,” and even the natives of Yap because “the people of the Carolines are probably allied in blood to those of Eastern Borneo.”

Once they returned from their travels, Furness, Hiller, and Harrison did not undertake to pursue such anthropological inquiries further, clearly feeling that their part ended with the gathering of artifacts and the recording of information on their context. Their goal was to collect information “of general and scientific interest,” and what they brought back from Borneo still serves both of these audiences. On July 11, 1899, the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin declined that “the thanks of the city of Philadelphia, as well as those of the University of Pennsylvania, are due to Messrs. Harrison, Furness, and Hiller for their liberal gift, and for the public-spirited manner in which they have turned their intelligent pastime to serious profit for their fellow citizens.” Today, the Furness-Hiller-Harrison collections and notes still constitute a rich source for scholars, and this year over 500 of the ethnographic objects are on display again for the instruction and amusement of the public.

Bibliography

Archival Materials

- Furness, Hiller and Harrison kept journals and notebooks and wrote letters while on their various collecting expeditions. Furness, Hiller, and Harrison’s letters to the Wistar Institute are still at the present writing, still at Wistar.


- 1902. The Home-Life of Borneo Head-Hunters.


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