

A Tropical Botanist Finally Vindicated

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Abstract

Proof of the existence of the note of authority from Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, to the Japanese, commending E.J.H. Corner to help conserve the Singapore Museum and Botanic Gardens has come to light.

Professor E.J.H. ('John') Corner (1906-1996) was one of the most colourful biologists of the century. He was Professor of Tropical Botany in the University of Cambridge, UK, and one of the very few botanists to work on both fungi and seed plants. His work was thought-provoking and often controversial, notably his views on systematic mycology and his advocacy of his Durian Theory of angiosperm evolution (Mabberley, 1983, 1999).

For many outside science, though, the most controversial part of his work was in Singapore during the occupation by Japanese Forces in WWII. Corner had come to Singapore in 1929 as Assistant Director of the Botanical Gardens. He found there:

'the main library and the main herbarium...The herbarium was a storehouse of knowledge...Not only were there hundreds of thousands of specimens scientifically arranged ...together with their invaluable field-notes...but also a large number of unpublished drawings and paintings of plants, records of expeditions as far afield as New Guinea, fieldbook manuscripts...it was a unique centre of botany. Similarly at Raffles Museum in Singapore there were the zoological, archaeological, and anthropological counterparts...as well as the Raffles Library and the library of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society'. (Corner, 1981)

The British surrendered Singapore to the Japanese at 5 pm on Sunday 15 February 1942. The Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas, had his office in the Fullerton Building. Here Corner, with many other officials in the Colonial Service, sought refuge while the city fell prey to looters. Through the ensuing restless night, Corner

'began pondering by what means the treasure houses of knowledge which had no military significance might be saved...If they were looted, I could not see that funds would ever come to start them again. Looting was the imminent danger. We had heard repeatedly during the last two months, as the [British] withdrawal [through the Malay Peninsula] hastened to Singapore, how the looters broke into buildings before the Japanese had gained control, and how they smashed doors, cupboards, desks, safes, and boxes, scattering the contents, throwing books and files into heaps

or bonfires, slashing pictures, and wrenching off taps to let the water run over books, papers, clothes, and carpets. I was thinking not just of the Botanical Gardens and Raffles Museum, but of the libraries of Raffles College, the College of Medicine, Government offices, even at Government House, and the service they could render in the restoration of peace and order...The whole progress of science in the Malay Peninsula seemed doomed'.

Next day, Corner

'spoke with several foresters and agriculturalists, who were also on that floor of the Fullerton Building, of the need to appeal to the Japanese to help look after scientific collections and records, only to meet the resolve that the British must now stand together, shoulder to shoulder, in custody and humility'.

The following morning Corner decided to put his proposition directly to the Governor, but as he

'opened the door to go downstairs, up came the Aide-de-Camp to order [Corner] to Sir Shenton who had had the same idea. Sir Shenton wrote me a pencilled note in which he requested the Japanese authorities to preserve the scientific collections, libraries, and matters of historic interest, particularly at the Museum and Botanical Gardens'.

Corner

'returned from Sir Shenton Thomas to [his] companions, showed them the note, and asked if any one would accompany [him], but in vain; there was the same determination to suffer in unity, which [he] would not, and [he] saw that at heart they were not scientists'.

Corner was able to get the dispatch through the Japanese authorities who passed it to Professor Hidezo Tanakadate (1884-1951), vulcanologist and geologist of Tohoku Imperial University at Sendai, Japan (Corner, 1946, 1951). Tanakadate was put in charge of the Gardens and the Museum: with him, Corner and others secured the collections and brought together the island's libraries, such that the heritage was saved for what is now the modern state of Singapore. A ship of Japanese technicians and officials had been sunk and the Japanese authorities therefore arranged for suitably qualified British people to take their places – and not to be interned in the Military Camp at Changi. Thus Corner and others became Civil Internees and continued their duties under Japanese orders. As is well known, most of the British were kept in disgusting conditions in the prison camp. Despite Corner's considerable success in organising food supplies, he was thereafter despised as a collaborator by many. For some of those who survived Changi, their loathing was to become a lifelong one. With the publication of Corner's account of the episode in *The Marquis. A tale of Syanon-to* (1981), that loathing was re-awakened: Corner's account, particularly of the Governor's note, was questioned.

Sadly for Corner, the all-important dispatch was lost in a fire in Sendai in 1945, when all of Tanakadate's belongings were destroyed. Only very recently has it come to light in the West that Tanakadate had in fact published the Governor's dispatch (pencilled, like many of those of Field

Marshal Montgomery, for example, so as to avoid smudging), in a contemporary Japanese newspaper. We now have the Japanese version of the events of the time.

Tanakadate had been based in Saigon, Vietnam, and wrote in his article sent from Singapore, 'Conservation of a culture. A month's travel in Singapore – Part I':

'As I was often being told of the significance of the fall of Singapore in the Great East Asian War, I stayed by the radio once I heard the news. I went to bed late. Next morning, while I was having breakfast, I was told ...that I was to be at the airport by 10 00. I got ready in five minutes....It was a memorable flight. We flew over Johore at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula...As we were landing we saw damaged aeroplanes, army barracks shot through like bee-hives...In the direction of Singapore, we saw black smoke from burning oil rising to the sky with red flames flaring up inside it....

In the morning of 17 February we travelled to Singapore City by car. We arrived at the city office and met people who worked there. They were chiefs of the military administration section, the executive section, the industry section, and Mr Toyota, who was the ex-Consul-general of Singapore. When they saw me, they said, "We have just received this from the ex-Governor", and handed me a letter.

The letter said "We truly hope that you will conserve the Museum and the Botanical Gardens at least, and that you will engage Dr [sic] Corner, who was formerly the Assistant Director of the Botanical Gardens for that purpose". I replied, "I have come here in order to conserve the cultural heritage. The requisitioning of the Museum is my first objective". At my words, everyone present, including the former mayor of Singapore, British and Japanese alike, glanced at one another and seemed pleased with my answer. Then they came to shake hands. It must have been a surprise for them to discover that a scientist from a university had come to conserve the local cultural heritage of an enemy country. The chief of the executive section said to me, "I entrust you with all the cultural institutions" and asked, "Will you accept the post of Director of the Botanical Gardens and Museum?" I answered "Yes", ...

On 18 February, Dr Corner came and helped me. I took over the Museum and the Botanical Gardens and began their conservation.'

(*Asahi Shinbun* 4 April 1942; modified, partly with the help of Ric Shiraishi and Peter Valder (Sydney), from a translation by Tadashi Kajita (Botanical Gardens, University of Tokyo), who also obtained for the author a copy of an original in the library of the National Diet in Tokyo).

And so John Corner is vindicated, at last.

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