

Arjun Guneratne (Macalester College)

The origins of ornithology as a science in nineteenth century Sri Lanka

In this paper, I examine how ornithology developed as a science in colonial Sri Lanka, to illuminate the working of nineteenth century science in a scientifically significant colony. As an island, the British colony of Ceylon was important for evolutionary theory; to be “islanded”, to use Sivasundaram’s term, was to be cut off from evolutionary processes on the mainland, and to study natural history on an island, it was thought, would allow insight into evolutionary processes. Sri Lanka was easy of access compared to other equally interesting islands, and became a destination for European and British Empire scientists throughout the nineteenth century. The bulk of ornithological work, however, was done by four men, three of them of military affiliation, who laid the foundation for the study of birds by mapping out the species composition, their distribution, and their natural history. In the process, they moved ornithology, in the space of forty years, from an exploratory phase to a full-fledged colonial science. In this paper, I examine this evolution and the connections between colonial British naturalists working on the island and their networks in Europe and the rest of the British empire. I tell this story by focusing mainly on the work of the Australian W. Vincent Legge, who, as an officer in the Royal Artillery, spent nine years in the island, during which he amassed the data to write his monumental treatise on Sri Lanka’s birds, as well as serving as secretary of the local branch of the Royal Asiatic Society and reorganizing the Colombo Museum. The paper discusses the nature of scientific networks, the extent of the dependence on local expertise, and the institutions—museums, journals, libraries, funding etc.—necessary to support science, to illuminate how scientific work was done in a politically peripheral but scientifically central Indian Ocean colony.