

**Diard & Duvaucel: French Natural History Drawings of Singapore and Southeast Asia (1818–1820)** by Francis Dorai and Martyn E. Y. Low (eds.) 2021. Embassy of France in Singapore and National Library Board, Singapore, in partnership with Epigram Books. 188 pp. Price S\$40.00 (hardcover).



To describe this present work as a lavish, large (coffee table) format book is in no way intended to downplay its utility and relevance. Renewed attention to the historic illustrations presented herein was stimulated by the 2019 vOilah! France Singapore Festival, celebrating the bicentennial of (Englishman) Thomas Stamford Raffles's arrival on the island. During his travels to Singapore, Penang and Sumatra as an officer of the British East India Company, Raffles was accompanied by two French naturalists, Pierre-Médard Diard and Alfred Duvaucel, both of whom were protégés of the renowned French zoologist, Georges Cuvier. Neither of the two is as widely-known in the predominantly Anglophone world of science, and more especially taxonomy, as they deserve. Considering birds alone, the two French collectors together have eight taxa named after them, many familiar to birdwatchers visiting Thailand.

Both Diard and Duvaucel were already based in Calcutta (now Kolkata), collecting animal specimens and dispatching them to the Museum Nationale d'Histoire Naturelle (MNHN) in Paris, before they were recruited to collect specimens of flora and fauna in Southeast Asia by Raffles in 1818. According to the introductory text in the present book, it was apparently agreed that duplicates of the collected specimens would be retained by the two French naturalists who, in addition, would provide Raffles with descriptions of the localities they visited, which he would then subsequently publish. Their expenses would be covered by the British East India Company. The pair set sail with Raffles in December 1818, together with a team of hunters, taxidermists and draftsmen and, after stops *en route*, shortly thereafter arrived in Singapore. Diard and Duvaucel collected specimens there and in Sumatra (Bencoolen, today Bengkulu, and its surroundings) and by August 1819 had amassed considerable collections.

However, Raffles and the East India Company apparently reneged on their prior agreement with the two French collectors, and proved unwilling to allow them to retain their specimens. It was only following negotiations, some sixteen months after the start of their expedition, that Diard and Duvaucel were permitted to depart, retaining but a single specimen of those species for which there were three or more examples. Each of these two collectors subsequently went his own way: Duvaucel continued to collect in Sumatra and then returned to India, where he died prematurely in 1824, while Diard collected further on Java and later traveled to areas of French influence in Indochina. Together, in the course of their collecting careers, they sent over 2,000 specimens of animals to MNHN, representing 88 mammal species, 630 bird species, and 59 reptile species. The Cuvier archive at MNHN also holds 91 drawings of birds, 16 of reptiles and amphibians and a few plants, invertebrates and fungi, which they commissioned, and which are reproduced in this book together with a couple of mammals.

The book's text is in both English and French. Pages 8–51 are taken up with the forewords and the essays introducing the illustrations, setting out broadly the circumstances and historical background concerning the specimen collecting on which they were based. Pages 53–177 present the paintings with accompanying notes on each. A six-page appendix presents an itemized listing of the illustrations and citations of relevant literature, both published papers and correspondence.

The illustrations themselves, covering 71 species of birds, are interesting from an historical rather than a biological perspective. A number have been misidentified: on p. 64 the illustration labeled as Thick-billed Green Pigeon *Treron curvirostra* depicts a closely related species, Grey-cheeked Green Pigeon *T. griseicauda*, which ranges from Java to Sulawesi and the Lesser Sundas, and which remains locally common in Bogor today (likely visited by Diard after the cessation of his association with Raffles). The prominent fleshy yellow orbital possessed by the illustration of Green-spectacled Green Pigeon *T. oxyura* (p. 70), suggests that it is, in fact, a female Black-naped Fruit Dove *Ptilinopus melanospilus*, another species common in parts of Java, including Bogor. The illustration on p. 73, provisionally identified by the editors as Grey Nightjar *Caprimulgus indicus*, is instead a Malaysian Eared Nightjar *Lyncornis temminckii*, while that on p. 75, labeled Beach Thick-knee *Esacus magnirostris*, is a Great Thick-knee *E. recurvirostris*, a species that does not occur in Sumatra and Java, and was thus likely encountered in then British Bengal. On p. 85, the supposed Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* likely shows instead a female or non-breeding Ruff *Calidris pugnax*, also most likely to have been collected in the Indian subcontinent. The authors are correct in supposing that what they label as “Asian Paradise-flycatcher” (p. 139) is, indeed, the Indian taxon, *Terpsiphone paradisi*, as evidenced by its long crest, rather than the expected southeast Asian representative, *T. affinis*, of the erstwhile *T. paradisi* superspecies. Of particular note, the (probably now extinct) Javanese Lapwing *Vanellus macropterus*, last recorded in 1939, is depicted on p. 81.

The detailed provenance of the illustrations, and the specimens from which they were painted, is largely unknown: possibly relatively few were collected on Singapore Island itself, and most were Sumatran or Javan in origin. Notwithstanding the book's title, many illustrations (fishes, one primate and perhaps one-quarter of all birds), could only have been painted from specimens collected in Bengal, or present-day Bangladesh, rather than in Southeast Asia. As already well-known to Southeast Asian ornithologists, a single trogon species apiece, Diard's Trogon *Harpactes diardii* and Scarlet-rumped Trogon *H. duvaucelii*, is named after

each collector. As an interesting aside, the former, the larger of the two, (not depicted) was once present on Ubin Island of Singapore, while the male of the smaller Scarlet-rumped Trogon, which is illustrated in the book, was apparently never historically recorded there. Those with a particular interest in unraveling details of how the decline in the Singaporean resident forest bird avifauna has progressed with the passage of time and human activity must, however, look elsewhere than in this book. Independent research, of which the book's authors are creditably aware, and to which they refer, suggests that at least one of the two illustrations of Green Broadbill *Calyptomena viridis* reproduced in the book may well have been based on specimens collected on Singapore, rather than on Sumatra as previously assumed. One or the other might perhaps even depict the very same among the "Raffles specimens" that was recently designated as the lectotype of the subspecies *C. v. viridis*, now taken to encompass all Thailand and Thai-Malay Peninsula populations south to Singapore. Sadly, however, the breeding population of the Green Broadbill was probably extirpated on Singapore Island more than eighty years ago. More recent records of this species involve presumed dispersants from Malaysia.

Notwithstanding the caveats that we have raised, both the illustrations and relevant literature citations presented in this book combine to make it an addition that might usefully grace the bookshelves of anyone interested in the history of the biological exploration of Singapore and the adjacent regions of western Indonesia.

***Philip Round***

Department of Biology  
Faculty of Science, Mahidol University  
Rama 6 Road, Bangkok 10400

***Ding Li Yong***

BirdLife International (Asia)  
354 Tanglin Road, #01-16/17  
Tanglin International Centre  
Singapore 247672