



Talking Malay, Writing American—The Case of Walter Gibson

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IAS Meeting Room 2.27, Level 2, FASS Building

Speaker's Profile



Hendrik M.J. Maier is a Leiden-trained philologist with a special interest for the Malay world. He taught Indonesian language and literature at Nijmegen University, was a visiting scholar at Cornell University and Kyoto University and held the chair of Indonesian and Malay studies at Leiden University until he was appointed Luce Professor Southeast Asian Studies at University of California, Riverside where he helped establish SEATRIP, a Program for Southeast Asian Studies. He published widely on Malay and Indonesian literature, and made Dutch translations of the work of prominent Indonesian and Malaysian authors.

Abstract

In 1852, Walter Murray Gibson – American adventurer, merchant, scholar, politician, journalist – paid a visit to the Malay Archipelago; he was arrested in Palembang and was held prisoner by Dutch authorities in Batavia before he managed to escape. Safely back in the USA, he wrote a brilliant book on his experiences and observations, 'The Prison of Weltevreden and a Glance at the East Indian Archipelago' (1855); his travel book and his journalistic work, examples of two genres which are often ignored in literary studies as well as historiography and anthropology, offer glances at the Malay world and its civilization that differ from the presentations in the work of scholars/administrators such as Marsden, Crawfurd, Raffles, and Leyden, the founding fathers of Malayistics, the scholarly discussions about the Malay world. Gibson's book has been dismissed as the irrelevant product of American imaginations since its first publication, and it may be time to rethink this dismissal. In particular his observations about Malay writing are definitely worth a second thought, and so are his loose remarks on Malayness.