

## **Dutronquoy, a man of many interests**

### *Hotelier, Businessman, and Naturalist*

#### **Who is Gaston Dutronquoy?**

Gaston Dutronquoy (ca. 1800–1872) arrived on Singapore's shores in March 1839. His origins, however, remain shrouded in mystery. Some sources suggested that he was French, while others claim he hailed from Jersey, had Belgian roots, or could pass off as Dutch<sup>1</sup>. Though a painter by profession, Dutronquoy dabbled in much more than painting. Interestingly, the photography services (daguerreotypes) he offered led him to be recognised as the first resident photographer in Singapore. The daguerreotype was an early photographic process that produced detailed images on silver-plated copper sheets without the use of a negative.

#### **Hotelier and Businessman**

Dutronquoy arrived in Singapore as a painter by profession on March 1839. The island's first daguerreotype photographic studio was established then. Within three months of his arrival, Dutronquoy successfully set up the London Hotel, establishing his position amongst Singapore's most prominent hoteliers. The hotel was initially situated within Commercial Square (now Raffles Place). In 1841, The London Hotel was eventually recognised as the most well-kept hotel in Singapore. It was later relocated to No.3 Coleman Street, closer to the Esplanade<sup>2, 3, 4</sup>. With his keen interest in photography and desire to expand his business, Dutronquoy later converted one of the London Hotel's rooms into the Theatre Royal—a space for amateur theatricals. By 1845, the London Hotel was equipped with restaurants, a photography studio, a theatre space, and a bowling alley along the back. It was the most spacious of the three hotels in business, and its grand design earned it the reputation of being “more like a “palace than an inn”<sup>4, 5, 6, 7</sup>.

#### **Naturalist**

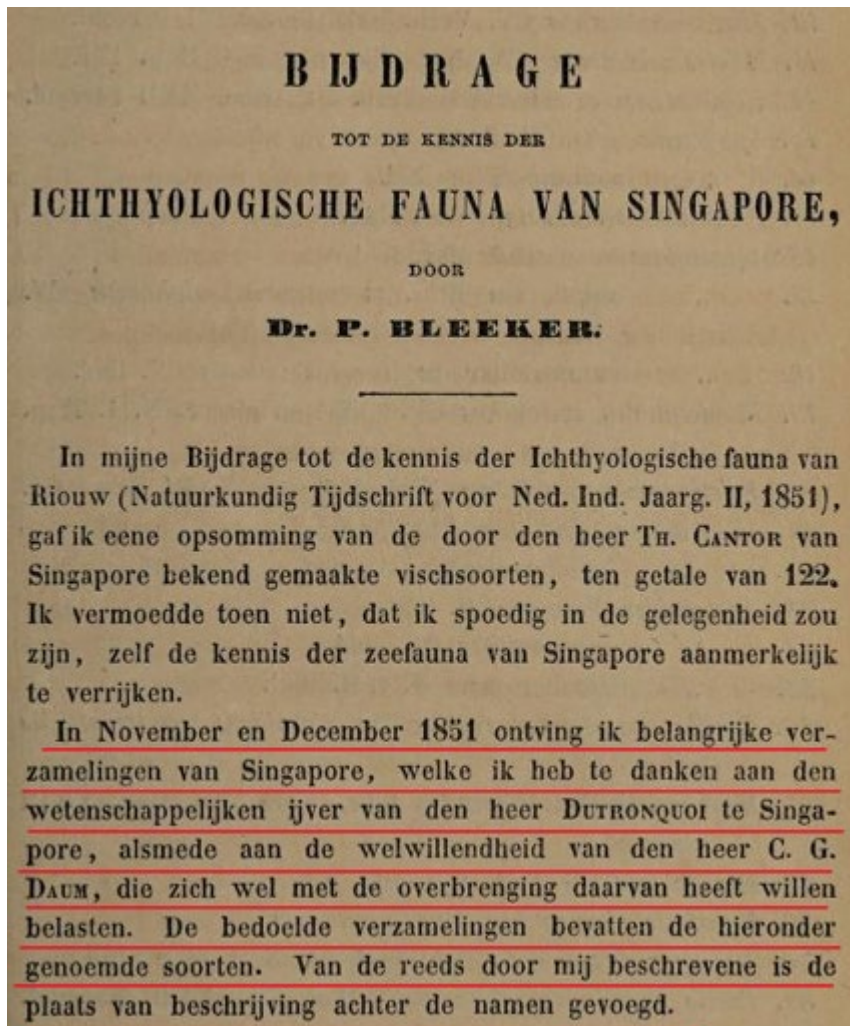
A lesser known side to this businessman was his interest in the collection of fish specimens, and his contributions to the region's natural history. In the early 1850s, Dutronquoy sent a collection of 102 fish specimens to Pieter Bleeker (1819–1878) in Batavia (now Jakarta)—a renowned ichthyologist and medical doctor who amassed a large collection of fishes from Southeast Asia. Bleeker served as a military surgeon in outposts in Java from 1847 to 1849. He later returned to Batavia and began encouraging his colleagues and other contacts across the archipelago to assist with the collection of fish specimens, Dutronquoy being one of them.



The holotype of *Chirocentrus hypselosoma*, currently known as *Chirocentrus dorab* (Forsskål, 1775), collected and donated by Dutronquoy to Bleeker's collection. (Naturalis Biodiversity Center, RMNH.PISC.24958). [Imaged by SIGNIFY.](#)



A specimen of *Triacanthus blochii*, currently known as *Tripodichthys blochii* (Bleeker, 1852), collected and donated by Dutronquoy to Bleeker. (Naturalis Biodiversity Center, RMNH.PISC.7262). [Imaged by SIGNIFY.](#)



In Bleeker's 1852 publication, 'Bijdrage tot de kennis der ichthyologische fauna van Singapore', he credited Dutronquoy for his donation of fish specimens. The underlined text translates to: "in November and December 1851, I received important collections from Singapore, which I owe to the scientific zeal of Mr. Dutronquoy [sic] of Singapore, as well as the goodwill of Mr C.G. Daum, who was willing to undertake their transmission..."<sup>8</sup>.

We can only speculate how Dutronquoy ended up in correspondence with Bleeker. Dutronquoy visited several countries across the East, including Batavia, where he may have encountered Bleeker or his colleagues. With Dutronquoy's hotels being situated in prime locations, naturalists such as Alfred Russel Wallace and Theodore Edward Cantor may have stayed at the London Hotel during their visit to Singapore. It is possible that Dutronquoy may have been influenced by these notable guests, and developed an interest in natural history. There is also the possibility that Bleeker met Dutronquoy when he visited Singapore. Although the beginnings are uncertain, in 1851, Dutronquoy sent specimens to Bleeker, who was known to be the leading fish researcher in Southeast Asia.

### Dutronquoy's whereabouts

Since 1854, Dutronquoy had been marked as "absent" in the 'Singapore Almanack'—a directory that recorded Singapore's government departments, officials, trades, professions and merchants. It was widely believed that he had disappeared along the Muar River while gold mining in Johor, with some speculating foul play. In 1868, however, he was listed as a foreign resident in Hankow, China and later recorded to have passed away in Kobe, Japan, with an obituary published in 'The London and China Telegraph' on 15 January 1872<sup>9, 10</sup>.

Despite these sources, the fate of Dutronquoy after the mid-1850s remains uncertain. Following his disappearance, his wife and son took over the management of the London Hotel until September 1857, where the estate was declared insolvent. The London hotel was subsequently acquired by a Frenchwoman, Madame Esperanza, and renamed Hotel l'Esperance. In 1865, it was again renamed to become the Hotel d'Europe under the ownership of a Frenchman named Casteleyns.

#### HIOGO.

Dates extend to the 17th Nov. ; the Pacific mail, with New York advices Sept. 24, arrived out Oct. 31, and the P. and O. mail of Sept. 22 on the 16th Nov. ; telegrams from London had been received to the 26th Oct.

The following items are from the *Hiogo News*:—A plot of ground situate at the corner of the Ikuta Baba and the Concession, and containing 359 tsubos—the rent of which is paid up to November 1st, 1874—was sold at public auction, by Messrs. A. de Ath and Co., for Mex. \$700, to Mr. F. Blake.

Lot No. 12, on the Osaka Concession, with a building thereon was sold by public auction by Messrs. Johnson and Co. to Mr. Klein for Mex. \$1,000.

M. Gaston Dutronquoy, whose death at an advanced age we record in another column, was one of the pioneers of Kobé, and the roll of those who fought at and survived Waterloo bears one name less. M. Dutronquoy had been in his time no mean traveller, and his mind must have been stored much above the average even of travelling humanity with recollections of strange scenes. In the East he had visited Singapore, Borneo, and Batavia ; in South America, Chili and Buenos Ayres ; in North America, California twice. He was also one of the pioneers of the gold rush to Melbourne. He arrived in Hong Kong in 1847, and afterwards visited various places in China, leaving Hankow for Kobé a short time before the opening of this port, only staying sufficiently long, we believe, at Nagasaki on the way to prepare a house which might be immediately erected on landing here. It is told of him that on his arrival here he opened a sort of drug shop, and when a customer required medicine, of which M. Dutronquoy pretended to no knowledge at all, he would first take a dollar, and then suggest that the customer should help himself according to his own discretion.

An excerpt from The London and China Telegraph from Jan 15, 1872, detailing the life of Dutronquoy after his supposed disappearance<sup>10</sup>.

In 1872, an article from 'The London and China Telegraph' reported that Dutronquoy had died of old age after having reportedly travel across East Asia. Though, it remains unclear whether this Dutronquoy was the same individual in question.

Over the years, the hotel underwent several name changes following each change in ownership and eventually ceased operations in 1932. The land was later acquired by the government and converted into the site where the former Supreme Court building was constructed. After World War II, the court moved to a new building, and the site was eventually converted into the National Gallery of Singapore, which opened in 2015<sup>12</sup>.



'Hotel d'Europe to Singapore' (1860)<sup>12</sup>.

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