

# The Death of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781 – 1826)

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## ABSTRACT

The authors reviewed a rare autopsy report of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles and offer a fresh interpretation of the cause of his death, with illustrations on the implied findings.

## INTRODUCTION

The history of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles and the founding of Singapore are well documented. Less well known is the history regarding the later part of his life and the circumstances surrounding his death. We reviewed his last evening and a little known autopsy report by an English physician, Sir Everard Home, and based on his report, feel confident that Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles died of cerebral haemorrhage arising from an arterio-venous malformation affecting the dura and right frontal lobe of the brain.

## The report from the Gentleman's Magazine – July 1826

"He had passed the preceding day in the bosom of his family, and, excepting a bilious attack under which he had laboured for some days, there was nothing in his appearance to create the least apprehension that the fatal hour was so near<sup>(1)</sup>.

Sir Stamford had retired to rest on the Tuesday evening between ten and eleven o'clock, his usual hour when in the country. On the following morning at five o'clock, it being discovered that he had left his room before the time at which he generally rose, six o'clock, Lady R immediately rose, and found him lying at the bottom of a flight of stairs, in a state of complete insensibility. Medical aid was promptly procured, and every means resorted to, to restore animation, but the vital spark had fled. The body was opened, under the direction of Sir Everard Home, the same day, who pronounced his death to have been caused by an apoplectic attack beyond the control of all human power."

## DISCUSSION

Only 4 conditions cause a thickening of a portion of the skull. Paget's Disease, fibrous dysplasia, meningioma and dural arterio-venous fistula or arterio-venous malformation<sup>(2)</sup>.

The first two conditions are not associated with abnormal vascularity of the dura or brain and are

On inspecting the body of the late Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles July 8<sup>th</sup> in the afternoon 1826 the following appearances were met with.

The skull upon being removed on the upper part, was found to have the right portion thicker than the left. The consequence of exposure to the sun for long continuance in India.

The dura mater had an infinite number of smaller arterial branches carrying red blood, which naturally only admit serum, <sup>rather</sup> are met with in a natural state. Immediately under the sinus over the longitudinal sinus, a space two inches long and one broad, was crowded with blood vessels as to appear of a different organization from the rest of the membrane.

In the right lateral ventricle, a conglomeration of blood larger than a pigeon's egg distended the cavity and more than four ounces of bloody serum had escaped on sawing the skull.

The viscera of the Thorax & Abdomen were found to be in a healthy state.

July 6<sup>th</sup> 1826 Everard Home

The Autopsy findings.

discounted. Likewise, no evidence of meningioma or brain tumour was discovered.

The last, arterio-venous malformation, fits the diagnosis well. The hypervascularity of the dura was noted as "exceeding anything I have ever seen." Also, an organised haematoma of about 4 oz was found in the right lateral ventricle indicating the arterio-venous malformation had bled internally into the ventricle.

The haemorrhage probably led to the fall and final demise of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles. A seizure could have well occurred prior to the fall.

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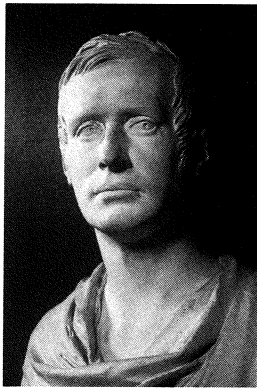


Fig 1 – Bust of Sir Stamford Raffles by Sir Francis Legatt Chantrey, India Office Chantrey, India Office Library.

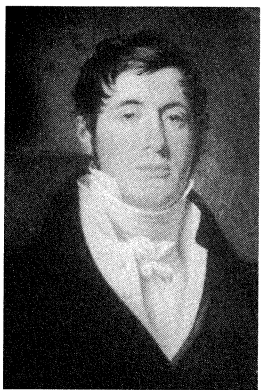


Fig 2 – Portrait of Sir Stamford Raffles (1781 – 1826), Singapore History Museum, National Heritage Board.

The following is a copy of the report made to the family of the late Sir T. S. Raffles by Sir Everard Home of the result of the examination as to the immediate cause of his death :

“On inspecting the body of the late Sir Stamford Raffles in the evening of the 5th of July, 1826, the following morbid appearances were observed :

“Upon removing the cranium, the anterior part of the right frontal bone was twice the thickness of the left ; this must be imputed to the effects of the sun in India, since it is a common occurrence in those who have resided long in hot climates. The outer covering of the brain was in a highly inflamed state, which had been of long continuance, from the thickness of the coats of the vessels. In one part, immediately upon the sinciput, this vasculosity exceeded any thing I had ever seen. In the right ventricle of the brain there was a coagulum of the size of a pullet’s egg, and a quantity of bloody serum escaped, which measured six ounces. This extravasation of blood, which had been almost instantaneous, was the cause of immediate death, so far as the faculties of the brain are concerned. In the other viscera of the body there was no appearance connected with disease.

“(Signed) EVERARD HOME.”

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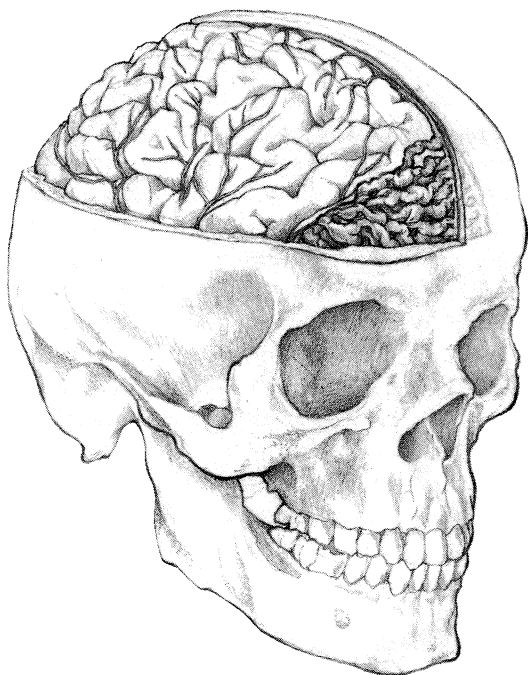


Fig 3 – Artist’s impression of post-mortem findings by Sir E Home.

Sir Raffles was well known to have frequent severe headaches. He described his health in some detail in his correspondence. Writing to the Duchess of Somerset in December 1821, Raffles stated that his “own health still continues most seriously affected, [he was] seldom well for twelve hours, and always laid

up for several days in the month.” In another letter to the Duchess written in February 1822, Raffles informed of the death of another two of his children, the depression of his wife, and as for himself, “had two of the most severe attacks [he] ever suffered. The last, a fever which fell on the brain, and [he] was almost mad. [He was] still an invalid, and confined to [his] room.”

Raffles’ health continued to deteriorate. A year later he wrote that he spent two thirds of his time in “pain and annoyance, from the dreadful headaches [he was] doomed to suffer in this country, but the remaining third has been actively employed.” On his last visit to Singapore from October 1822 to June 1823, Raffles wrote to the Duchess of Somerset that he “had another attack in the head, which nearly proved fatal, and the doctors were for hurrying [him] on board ship for Europe without much ceremony.

However, as [he] could not reconcile myself to become food for fishes, I preferred ascending the Hill [Fort Canning], where, if my bones must remain in the East, they would have the honour of mixing with the ashes of Malayan Kings; and the result has been that instead of dying, [he] almost recovered. [He had] build a very comfortable house [on Fort Canning] which is sufficient to accommodate his sister’s family as well as [his] own.” Raffles’ health, as expected, did not improve following his return to England<sup>(3-5)</sup>.

These symptoms were likely to be due to the arterio-venous malformation, causing minor haemorrhages or an ischaemic steal effect, causing headaches and irritability.

Figs 1 & 2 show the official bust and portrait of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles with hair usually covering the right frontal brow. The prominence is quite suggestive. Fig 3 shows an illustration of the arterio-venous malformation of the brain as described, by Sir Everard Home.

## CONCLUSION

This report gives a neurosurgical and neuropathological interpretation to Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles’ last days and the cause of his death, based on his biography and autopsy report.

That the founder of Singapore could have suffered such a condition and yet do all that he did makes him even more remarkable.

## REFERENCES

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