

Biographical Notes

Ivan Polunin (12 December 1920¹ – 21 December 2010) - Medical doctor, naturalist, photographer

Dr Ivan Polunin was best known in Singapore for his collection of photographs and films depicting Singapore social life in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the region's fauna and flora.

Polunin was born in London to a Russian father and English mother, both of whom were artists.² The youngest of four children, Polunin attended the Colet Court preparatory school and St Paul's School in London. He went on to read medicine in Oxford in 1939. After his graduation in 1945, he did a year of housemanship at two hospitals in London before getting a research fellowship to do experimental pathology at the Dunn School of Pathology.³

He came to Malaya in 1948 with a group of young doctors. His first two postings were to the general hospitals in Kuala Lumpur (1948) and Johor Bahru (1949) as a hospital doctor.⁴ It was during his local leave, when he travelled to the interior of Malaya, that he first became interested in the epidemiology in the local populations, specifically of the aborigines.⁵ With support from Peter Williams Hunt, first professor of Social Medicine and Public Health at the University of Malaya and a research grant, Polunin began his survey of the health and diseases of the aborigines in Ulu Jelai (Pahang), Upper Perak and the Straits of Johor.⁶

In 1952, following a trip back to England, Polunin returned to work as a lecturer at Department of Social Medicine and Public Health at the University of Malaya (Singapore campus).⁷ Polunin worked at the University until his retirement in 1980 as an Associate Professor.⁸

Even while he taught at the University, Polunin was actively engaged in ethnographic studies and documentation of the peoples in the region. In 1953, Polunin received an invitation by the government of North Borneo to look into the decline of the Murut people. This was one of his most prominent ethnographic studies.⁹ Polunin was also reported to have discovered a small group of aborigines from an unknown tribe during a field trip to the Ulu Rompin area in Negri Sembilan in 1954.¹⁰

Apart from that study, Polunin travelled extensively throughout the Malayan Peninsula and the region. On these trips, Polunin took numerous photos and films – he was credited for making some 24 documentaries on the region's wildlife, people and traditional music.¹¹ He also made films for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on the social life of people in the region between 1950 and

¹ Oral History Centre, *Oral history interview with Ivan V. Polunin*, accession number 001765, reel. 1 (12 July 1995).

² "A discoverer of new worlds", *The Straits Times*, 25 January 1989; "Retired don to receive Ruth Wong award", *The Straits Times*, 20 October 1988.

³ Oral History Centre, *Oral history interview with Ivan V. Polunin*, reel. 1.

⁴ Oral History Centre, *Oral history interview with Ivan V. Polunin*, reel. 1.

⁵ Oral History Centre, *Oral history interview with Ivan V. Polunin*, reel. 1.

⁶ Oral History Centre, *Oral history interview with Ivan V. Polunin*, reel. 2; "A discoverer of new worlds", *The Straits Times*, 25 January 1989.

⁷ Oral History Centre, *Oral history interview with Ivan V. Polunin*, reel. 2; "A discoverer of new worlds", *The Straits Times*, 25 January 1989.

⁸ "Retired don to receive Ruth Wong award", *The Straits Times*, 20 October 1988.

⁹ Oral History Centre, *Oral history interview with Ivan V. Polunin*, reel. 2; "The decline and fall of the Muruts", *Singapore Standard*, 13 July 1956; "Why does the story shun the Muruts? Mystery", *The Straits Times*, 14 January 1959; Polunin, Ivan, "134. A Note on Visual Non-Literary Methods of Communication Among the Muruts of North Borneo", *Man* 59 (1959), pp. 97 - 99; McNeill, William et al, "Historical Patterns of Migration [and Comments and Reply]", *Current Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (1979), pp. 95 - 102.

¹⁰ "Lost' tribe found in Malaya", *The Straits Times*, 6 June 1954.

¹¹ "A zest for living spurs doctor to keep discovering new worlds", *The Straits Times*, 2 August 1987.

1973.¹² Many of his photographs were also included in articles he contributed to the Time-Life and National Geographic magazines on the region's indigenous peoples.¹³

Polunin had wide ranging interests that included the flora and fauna of the region,¹⁴ regional indigenous tribes, photography, film, folk music of the region,¹⁵ and ancient Asian pottery.¹⁶ He published two books on the flora and fauna of Singapore and Malaysia – *Plants and flowers of Singapore* (1987) and *Plants and Flowers of Malaysia* (1989),¹⁷ and was considered an expert on fireflies.¹⁸

Polunin was also a long-time volunteer with the Singapore Children's Society. He was a member of the Society's Convalescent Home Standing Committee from 1966 to his death.¹⁹

Polunin died at his home on 21 December 2010.²⁰ He was survived by his wife, Fam Siew Yin, a cousin of Elizabeth Choy,²¹ and two daughters.²² Following his death, his family donated his large collection of colour images and films to the National Library Board for preservation.²³ His personal and published writings were donated to ISEAS Library in 2012.²⁴

¹² "Library inherits papers of doctor-naturalist", *The Straits Times*, 15 December 2012.

¹³ "Retired don to receive Ruth Wong award", *The Straits Times*, 20 October.

¹⁴ "A discoverer of new worlds", *The Straits Times*, 25 January 1989.

¹⁵ "A discoverer of new worlds", *The Straits Times*, 25 January 1989.

¹⁶ "A zest for living spurs doctor to keep discovering new worlds", *The Straits Times*, 2 August 1987.

¹⁷ "A discoverer of new worlds", *The Straits Times*, 25 January 1989.

¹⁸ "Dr Ivan Polunin dies", *Straits Times*, 22 December 2010.

¹⁹ Singapore Children's Society, "Tribute to Dr Ivan Polunin", *Sunbeam*, Issue 54 (April 2011), p. 5, retrieved from https://www.childrensociety.org.sg/resources/ck/files/newsletter-and-report/sunbeam_newsletter_april_2011.pdf

²⁰ "Dr Ivan Polunin dies", *Straits Times*, 22 December 2010.

²¹ "A discoverer of new worlds", *The Straits Times*, 25 January 1989; "Doctor's rare images of S'pore to be preserved", *Straits Times*, 23 December 2010.

²² "Dr Ivan Polunin dies", *Straits Times*, 22 December 2010.

²³ "Doctor's rare images of S'pore to be preserved", *Straits Times*, 23 December 2010.

²⁴ "Library inherits papers of doctor-naturalist", *Straits Times*, 15 December 2012.