TRAVELS
IN THE
EAST INDIAN
ARCHIPELAGO

BY
ALBERT S. BICKMORE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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INTRODUCTION

Albert Smith Bickmore was born at St. George, a small town on the coast of Maine, opposite Monhegan Island, on 1 March 1839, the son of John Bickmore, a sea captain and shipbuilder, and his wife, Jane (née Seavey). When he was eight years old his father took him on his ship to Bordeaux in France, and his fascination for a life of travel and the study of nature commenced at this time. Much of his youth was spent in roaming the woods and shores of Maine, collecting rock specimens, shells, and other natural curiosities, and he began to study for college at Thomaston, Maine, and completed his preparatory course at New London, New Hampshire, under Dr C. W. Gardner. He entered Dartmouth College in 1856, where he studied chemistry and geology, and graduated in 1860. During his college vacations he travelled in the vicinity of Hanover, studying the geology of the region and collecting natural history specimens. He was encouraged at Dartmouth to approach the Swiss zoologist, Professor Louis Agassiz, of Harvard University, with the objective of studying zoology, and he was accepted as one of his pupils in the Lawrence Scientific School and as his assistant in the Museum of Comparative Zoology in charge of radiates and molluscs.

In 1862 he visited Bermuda to collect for the Museum in Cambridge, and on his return he joined the 44th Massachusetts Volunteers in which he served during the Civil War from 22 October 1862 until 18 June 1863, mainly in North Carolina. Soon after his return to Harvard he ran foul of Agassiz, who controlled his students in a somewhat dictatorial manner by not allowing them to publish their research until he decided, and who forbade them from applying for jobs without
his permission. When Agassiz discovered that Bickmore was secretly raising money from friends and supporters for an expedition to re-collect in the Indonesian island of Ambon the shells figured in Rumphius's *D'Amboinsche Rariteitkamer* (Amsterdam, 1705), he refused to recommend him to a permanent post as his assistant, which in effect meant his being dismissed.

Having raised sufficient funds for his proposed expedition, Bickmore sailed from Boston in January 1865 aboard the American ship *Memnon* (Captain Freeman) via the Cape of Good Hope for Indonesia, and arrived at Jakarta in April of that year. Armed with a letter of introduction from Governor-General Baron Sloet van de Beele, giving him permission to travel freely throughout the Netherlands Indies, he left Jakarta on 7 June aboard a Dutch mail-steamer for Ambon, which he reached at the end of the month, after calling at Semarang, Surabaya, Macassar (Ujung Pandang), and Timor. From then, until early in the following year, he travelled extensively in eastern Indonesia to Seram, Banda, Buru, Gilolo (Halmahera), Ternate, Tidore, Sulawesi Utara, Kema, Manado, Tondano, and Ujung Pandang, during which time he made large natural history collections, particularly of shells, insects, and birds. He returned to Jakarta, via Surabaya and Semarang, in February 1866, and then proceeded to Padang in west Sumatra, where he visited Tapanuli and the Batak regions of north-central Sumatra, as well as Bengkulu on the south-western coast. He travelled across the island to Palembang, and on to Bangka, Riau, and Singapore, where he arrived on 18 May 1866. From there he took a French ship for Hong Kong, which called at Saigon, and then journeyed through the interior of China, voyaging down the Yangtze River to Shanghai. Afterwards he travelled northwards to Peking and Korea, and visited a number of the coastal ports of China before going on to Japan. He next journeyed to the mouth of the Amur River and overland through Siberia to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Berlin, and London.

After his return to the United States in 1867, Bickmore began to prepare his volume of travels for publication. It had not been his primary intention to write such a book, but he was encouraged to work up the materials contained in his journals,
and he did this by integrating large sections of information drawn from the works of Raffles, Crawfurd, Horsfield, Earl, Wallace, Jukes, Kolff, and Valentijn, and early Portuguese sources. Whether or not the book gains from these somewhat artificial insertions may be doubted, since they remove something from the spontaneity of Bickmore’s writing, which is infused with the enthusiasm of a young man in his twenties coming face to face with the exciting natural world of Indonesia. The book was published in London by John Murray in December 1868, and thus preceded, by four months, the publication of Alfred Russel Wallace’s classic work, The Malay Archipelago, which also presented much new information on eastern Indonesia. An American edition of Bickmore’s book was published in New York in 1869 by D. Appleton and Company from stereotype plates of the London edition, but with the curious omission from the Appendix of ‘A list of the birds collected by the author on the island of Buru’. In the same year a German translation of the work by J. E. A. Martin was published in Jena, Reisen im Ostindischen Archipel in den Jahren 1865 und 1866, and a Dutch edition, with additional notes by J. J. Hollander, was published in two volumes in Schiedam in 1873 under the title, Reizen in den Oost-Indischen Archipel.

The book enjoyed much critical acclaim at the time of its publication, some contemporary reviewers preferring it to Wallace’s work because it contained more up-to-date information. It gained its author a Life Fellowship of the Royal Geographical Society of London, and in the year of its publication he was elected to the Professorship of Natural History in Madison (now Colegate) University at Hamilton, New York. In 1869 he resigned this post to become Superintendent of the American Museum of Natural History of New York, which he originated, and secured its first general subscription. He served the Museum for the remainder of his life, first as Superintendent until 1884, and then as Professor in Charge of the Department of Public Education, a role for which he was especially suited. From 1882 until his retirement in 1914, he delivered no less than 418 public lectures upon 213 different subjects relating to geography and natural history to a total audience of 16,638 persons. And, as many of these lectures were repeated by the Board of Education in New York, under
the direction of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, they reached over one million pupils in the State Normal Schools, the Teachers' Institutes, and public schools in the state.

Bickmore travelled widely every year to gain new material for his lectures, and during his life he visited virtually every country north of the equator, with the exception of India. In 1914, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, shortly before his death, his colleagues in the Faculty of the Museum presented him with a message of congratulation in which were praised his 'far-sighted prescience and boundless enthusiasm' in conceiving 'the idea of a great general museum of natural history to be located in the metropolis of the western world'. The extraordinary thing is that even when he was travelling in the Indonesian archipelago as a young man of twenty-six, Bickmore carried with him as his two closest possessions his Bible and a fully worked out plan on paper of the Museum which was to become his permanent monument.

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