

The man who loved Singapore

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On June 18, 1930, a Dutchman died in the city of Haarlem (now part of Amsterdam), in the Netherlands. In his will, he left his whole estate to Singapore. Who was this man?

His name was Karel Willem Benjamin van Kleef. He was born on Nov20, 1856, in Batavia (now Jakarta). His father was Salomon Benjamin van Kleef, a gynaecologist. His mother was Geetruida van Hogezaand. Both Salomon and Geetruida were Jewish. They had met and married in Batavia on Nov25, 1850.

Dr and Mrs van Kleef had four children. The first child, Maria Elizabeth, was born in 1851. Karel was the second child. The third child, Wilhem Samuel, was born in 1856 and died a year later and was buried in a cemetery in Jakarta. The fourth child, Herman, was born in 1863 in Amsterdam.

We know nothing about Karel's childhood and education. All that I have been able to find in the Dutch National Archives and Dutch National Genealogical Centre is a certificate (undated), certifying that he was an expert in drilling in the mining industry.

Karel had worked in the mining industry in Indonesia. At some point in his adult life, Karel left Indonesia and relocated to Singapore. We are not sure what he did for a living in Singapore, but we know that he was successful and became prosperous. He left Singapore and retired in Haarlem, the Netherlands, where he died.

How much money did Karel van Kleef leave to Singapore? He left the sum of \$160,000, which, in today's dollars, would be equivalent to \$8.985 million.

Why did Karel van Kleef leave his entire estate to Singapore? We do not know why he chose to do so. He could have bequeathed his estate to his older sister, Maria, or her children. He could have chosen to benefit the land of his origin, the Netherlands, or the land of his birth, Indonesia. Instead, he chose to bequeath his entire fortune to Singapore. This is why I call him 'the man who loved Singapore'. I know of no other person, Singaporean or non-Singaporean, who has bequeathed his entire fortune to Singapore.

What did Singapore do with the money? In 1931, the municipal government set up a committee to make recommendations on the best way to use the money. The committee considered three options: a landscaped garden, an aquarium and a zoological garden. In 1933, it was decided to build an aquarium and to name it the Van Kleef Aquarium. However, the construction was delayed by the difficult situation in Europe and the outbreak of World War II.

The Van Kleef Aquarium was finally opened in 1955, 25 years after the benefactor's death. The aquarium was a great success and attracted 166,000 visitors in its first four months of operation. The annual visitorship climbed steadily from about 200,000 to a peak of 400,000.

The aquarium was closed in 1991 because it was unable to compete with the new Underwater World in Sentosa. It was privatised and re-opened as the World of

Aquarium. It failed after two years. It changed hands again and re-opened as the Fort Canning Aquarium in 1993. In December 1996, the aquarium was closed for the final time. Two years later, in 1998, the building was demolished and, with it, the name of our benefactor, Karel van Kleeef.

Singapore should not allow the name of the only person who loved us so much that he bequeathed his entire estate to our country to disappear from our collective memory. I cannot help comparing him with an Englishman, James Smithson, who made a similar bequest to America. The US Congress accepted the bequest with gratitude and established the Smithsonian Institution in his memory. The Smithsonian Institution is today one of the great cultural institutions of America and of the world. Let us think of an appropriate way to perpetuate the memory of Karel van Kleeef.

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