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# BORNEO PEOPLE

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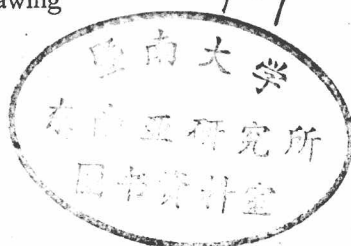
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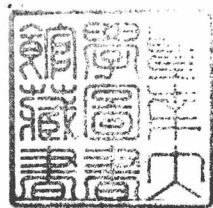


Illustrated  
with 44 photographs and a drawing  
by the author

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# BORNEO PEOPLE

*By the same Author*

CANADIAN NORTH  
THE BIRDS OF BREWERY CREEK  
ANGKOR

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PART ONE

THE COUNTRY



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CHAPTER ONE

THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLES

**B**ORNEO lies across the equator. It is a land where men are simple men, women are unsophisticated women, monkeys are uninhibited monkeys, orchids are blooming orchids and all manner of other living creatures are their own natural, unspoiled selves.

Sarawak is a small state in Borneo, a country enjoying a certain romantic fame as the sometime realm of the White Rajahs. Its shores are washed by the South China Sea, which in olden times was notorious for the traffic which it bore. Innocent ships voyaging over it were liable to sudden assault by pirates, whose craft were light, swift prahus operating in fleets like swarms of darting, deadly mosquitoes. Manned by crews of human fiends, they made Sarawak's coast a place of wicked reputation.

That was a century ago; but for those with eyes to see beyond mere physical forms the ghosts of those days still haunt the sunshine and shadows when a breeze whispers and the tide murmurs on tropical evenings along the shore. I have often felt their presence as I lay becalmed in the estuaries of their ancient hiding-places up sultry rivers.

Now Sarawak is a peaceful place. Its coastline is bordered by long white beaches. When the monsoon blows, giant breakers thunder along those pleasant strands, strewing them with flotsam and jetsam; but in clement weather the sands lie clean and smooth like endless race-tracks for motor cars. Inland the country is covered with jungle, save in small patches where man has cleared and tamed the ground for agriculture. It is like the luxurious growth of a vast hot-house, for the equatorial climate bathes Sarawak in perpetual summer. Nowhere on earth is natural vegetation more lavish.

The prospect is always green. A visitor gazing on it from an aeroplane sees, wherever he looks, billions and billions of leaves. The country is a paradise of foliage, not flowers; but in shadowy recesses the forest hoards its floral treasures. Exquisite and languid, they dangle in mid-air, suspended from the tree trunks. In places these orchids flourish abundantly. Hundreds of different species are native to

Borneo, among them some of the most fancifully shaped and exuberantly tinted of all their strange, magnificent tribe. In the deep woodland, too, grow many varieties of pitcher plants, fantastic beauties with a sinister reputation for devouring insects.

Heavy rainfall and hot sunshine conspire to produce this extravagant growth. High above the jungle spreads the sky, a blue canopy often ornamented with floating clouds. The Sarawak scene is usually a pleasing combination of green earth and blue and white heaven; but periodically black storms pass over the land, lashing it with hurricanes of wind, illuminating it with fitful streaks of lightning, blasting it with shattering roars of thunder, and drenching it with sharp, tumultuous rain. The torrents which descend unevenly throughout the year sustain many rivers. Except for paths worn by the feet of native hunters, these rivers alone penetrate the jungle. They are the great highways and the small byways of travel in roadless Sarawak.

Animal life is plentiful. Parts of the jungle are as empty as a desert, but others are alive with innumerable inmates of a fascinating wild zoological garden. Among its myriad forms are many species of strange stick and leaf insects. Nature never had a more ingenious inspiration than when, to protect them, it made these creatures in the image of the twigs on which they feed. Other Bornean insects are less passive. Unwary travellers are stung by mosquitoes, bitten by ants and sucked by leeches wherever they struggle through the jungle. By day in the more open spaces their eyes are often delighted by spectacles of gorgeous butterflies, and at night everywhere their ears are entertained — if that be the right expression — by massed orchestras of cicadas and other tedious musicians.

The varieties of small, furry animals include several which took to aviation long before Man did. There are flying squirrels, flying foxes, flying lizards and even flying frogs. In the tree-tops other aerobats disport themselves. Monkeys galore swing and leap from branch to branch like troupes of trapezists. Among the apes is a renowned monster found only in Borneo and Sumatra — the orangutan or 'man of the trees'. Short-legged and long-armed, with massive torsos covered with brick-red hair, these members of the *Order Primates* contemplate you, when you meet them, with melancholy eyes, as if they had just read Darwin's *Origin of Species* and were painfully aware of being your poor relations who have not done so well in life.

Wild pigs, mouse deer, leopard cats, bears, pythons, rhinoceros, and many other interesting beasts live in the jungle. Elephants roam in a

small area of neighbouring North Borneo. They were not original inhabitants, but arrived generations ago as an impressively large gift from the Sultan of Sulu to his fellow ruffian, the Sultan of Brunei. In their new home they thrived, but soon grew weary of the artificial pomp of court life and escaped to the freedom of the jungle, where they have lived in happy natural state ever since.

Up the rivers lurk crocodiles, and among their companions in the muddy waters are some strange fish. They include poisonous fish, stinging fish and even singing fish. I am told that if you sit silent in a boat above the aquatic bower of one of these sirens, you can hear the faint mumble of its modest dirge. On islands off the coast turtles produce their young, each mother laying several scores of eggs like a collection of battered ping-pong balls.

Bird life is also plentiful. Among the large specimens are grotesquely majestic hornbills, and among the lesser is the spider-hunter, a charming creature with a small green body and long, down-curving bill who plays, unwittingly, a significant part in the lives of the native peoples, for it determines the omens by which conduct in pagan society is ruled. Sunbirds, flower-peckers, bulbuls, flycatchers, trogons, drongos, parrots, bee-eaters, kingfishers, goatsuckers, kites, parakeets and hundreds of other species inhabit the swamps and forest.

So Sarawak is the home of a splendid menagerie of birds and beasts; and among the other animals in the jungle lives that astonishing species, *Homo Sapiens* — Man.

ii

Peoples of several different races inhabit Sarawak. Their creeds are as varied as their origins. They include primitive tribes who are mostly pagans, Malays who are exclusively Moslems, Chinese who are predominantly Buddhists, Europeans who are usually Christians, Indians who are generally Hindus, and Melanaus who are an impartial mixture of pagans, Christians and Mohammedans. The total population of the country is less than 600,000 men, women and children. Rather more than half belong to the pagan tribes, fewer than twenty per cent are Malays, about twenty-five per cent are Chinese, and the Melanaus and other races compose the rest.

No one knows when man first lived in Borneo, nor precisely what type of human beings the aboriginals were. The ancestors of the present inhabitants arrived in a series of migrations spread over several centuries. Each invasion of newcomers came from the sea, established themselves first along the coast and then penetrated inland. Usually

the earlier, more savage settlers retreated before the later comers, withdrawing ever farther up the rivers. So the most primitive types of residents are now found in the remote interior.

These natives in the deep jungle are 'uncivilized' pagans. They associate together in primitive tribal organizations and are divided among distinct ethnological groups called Punans, Penans, Kayans, Kenyahs, Ibans, Land Dayaks, Muruts and various others. They are the real 'wild men of Borneo'. Except to a trained eye, they appear physically much alike. Judged by European standards they are of less than medium height; their hair is black, long and lank; and the pigments of their skins range from dark brown to pale *café-au-lait*. Their faces show, in almost all cases, though in diverse degrees, the customary Mongoloid characteristics: 'wide cheek-bones, the small oblique eyes, the peculiar fold of the upper eye-lid at its nasal end, and the scanty beard', while 'the nose varies greatly in shape, but is usually rather wide at the nostrils'.<sup>1</sup>

None of the tribes has any written history. Vague traditions concerning their earlier adventures are handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, and the rest is lost in the thick mists enshrouding the past. As I have said, they came to Borneo in successive waves of immigration, and each brought its own characteristic social organization, customs and dialect. To some extent they have influenced one another since, but many differences still distinguish their various groups. In particular, they have not evolved a common language, though they have lived for ages as neighbours on the same rivers. They speak a multiplicity of unconnected tongues, each incomprehensible to the next-door communities up or down stream.

The most interesting fact about human society in Sarawak is that much of it has scarcely changed for centuries. The earlier immigrant peoples still live in similar conditions to those when they arrived several hundred years ago. Indeed, the simplest among them are not merely like men near the dawn of history: they *are* men near the dawn of history, authentic examples of primitive man. Sarawak is an anthropologist's dream.

The lowliest peoples are the Penans and Punans and a few similar tribes. Perhaps they are indigenous to the country, true aboriginals; but the generally accepted opinion seems to be that ages ago even they were immigrants. It would be difficult to imagine a human society simpler than that, for example, of the Punans. Its members lead no settled existence,

<sup>1</sup> From *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo* by Charles Hose and William McDougall, Macmillan, London, 1929.

and are nomads for ever wandering in small family groups through the half-lit world of the tropical forest. They build no permanent dwellings, keep no domestic animals and engage in no agriculture. Hunters pure and simple, they erect temporary shelters of leafy roofs supported on sticks wherever they happen to stay for a few weeks or months, then drift onwards, living on jungle fruits, wild sago and such game as they can kill. They use primitive tools and weapons. Their home-made spears are fashioned from sharpened wood. Occasionally they now acquire steel spear-heads and parangs (short swords) from more sophisticated tribes, bartering them for jungle produce such as gutta-percha, damar and rattans; but their favourite weapon is still the blow-pipe, a rod of hard wood some eight feet long bored through its centre with a barrel like a gun. Into one end of the weapon the hunter fits a bamboo dart tipped with poison brewed from the sap of the ipoh tree. Holding the blow-pipe to his lips and aiming at the object of his chase, he fills his cheeks with air and puffs the poisoned arrow through the bore. The dart flies straight and true for a short distance. At twenty yards a Punan's aim is unerring. The missile buries its sharp barb in the victim's flesh, and the poison quickly does its work. Wild pigs, deer and monkeys fall prey to the nomads' spears and arrows.

The extraordinary skill with which, by means of simple mechanical devices, the Punans bore the barrels in their blow-pipes marks a certain degree of attainment which elevates them a little above utter savagery. They also make fine rattan mats and baskets, and are clever at singing rude, melancholy songs. These are their chief claims to craftsmanship and art. Their clothes are as unsubstantial as could be, the men wearing skimpy loin-cloths and the women brief skirts made from tree bark. With no other adornment these light-brown Adams and Eves drift through the shadowy places of Sarawak's jungle and the even darker recesses of human history.

### iii

The other pagan peoples in Borneo are also lightly clad. The men wear only loin-cloths and the women short skirts. When they work in their padi-fields or travel along the rivers in the heat of the day they augment these costumes with straw hats almost the size of parasols, to protect them from the scorching sun. They have reached that stage of development, however, when their garments are made of woven cotton or cloth, and men and women alike often don small trinkets such as ear-rings, necklaces and bangles. They have an eye for



pretty things, and enjoy dressing up. On gala occasions their costume assumes barbaric splendour.

Unlike the Punans, the Kayans, Kenyahs, Ibans, Land Dayaks and others live a settled life. Except in the case of some Land Dayaks, their dwellings are the famous long-houses. These interesting and in many ways charming wild men—and for that matter wild women also—of Borneo will fill a large part of this book, so I shall not start now on a fuller description of them. But I must mention in passing the accomplishment for which they are most renowned. The outside world knows little about them beyond their passion for taking human heads.

In bygone days head-hunting was their favourite sport. They collected heads with as much zeal as acquisitive people in more advanced countries devote to collecting furniture, pictures, porcelain and other *objets d'art*, though perhaps with a less discriminating eye for period pieces. Frequently the men of a long-house felt an urge to raid another house, slay its inmates and bring back their severed heads as trophies to hang in their own home. In this hobby they received hearty encouragement from their wives and sweethearts. It is said that in some groups the taking of a head was regarded by the women as an essential test of masculine virtue, and that no maiden would accept the advances of a youth who had not so proved himself.

I shall not attempt to probe deeply into the dark mystery of how Bornean natives originally acquired this habit. One opinion is that it had something to do with ending the period of mourning after a chief's death. The restless spirit of the departed leader could find no peace in the next world until a retainer was killed to attend him; so the head of a sacrificial victim was placed beside his grave as proof that this last earthly service had been performed. Speculation upon the accuracy of the theory is a subject for anthropologists and psychologists, and interested readers may pursue it in their learned works.

At first the gruesome pastime of head-hunting was probably kept within some sort of decent bounds by religious taboos as well as prudent social restraints. In time, however, the original checks were relaxed. No one can tell how the change took place. Possibly it happened much as a similar development might occur if a people's religion decreed that on certain sacred occasions their priests should smoke opium. The priests would become increasingly zealous devotees of this holy duty, and then helpless slaves to it. They would find good reasons why the special days when they performed it should dawn with ever greater frequency. In due course the ecstasy of their spiritual