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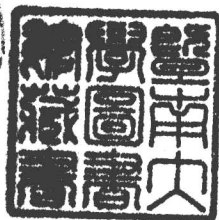
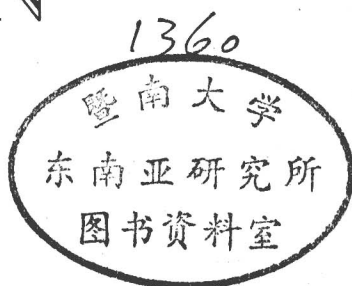
TOM HARRISSON

WORLD WITHIN

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A BORNEO STORY

1360



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WORLD WITHIN

A Borneo Story



Other books by Tom Harrison

'Letter to Oxford' (1933)

'Savage Civilization' (1937)

'Living among Cannibals' (1942)

'People in Production' (1942)

'The Pub and the People' (1943)

★ ★ ★

'The Malays of Sarawak' (in press)

Sarawak Museum Journal (ed: twice a year)

with Charles Madge

'Mass-Observation' (1937)

'War begins at Home' (1940)



Negri Besar ('Great Country'), an upper-class Kelabit, and
the author (5'11½"), 1945

To
LOUIS C. G. CLARKE
Trinity Hall, Cambridge
Oldest of friends



Note

Though this story is true, I have modified or altered a few incidents, and some personal or place names, to avoid giving hurt (or conceit). It is also likely I have made some mistakes of dates and name spellings and similar detail in Part III, which reports a period when exact records were seldom possible—and I often did not meet, for months, people I was dealing with (and perhaps believing) a few map-miles over the mountains away.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The main experience on which the present volume is based was acquired during war service, including service with 'secret' units of the British, Australian and incidentally Dutch armies. But the events are now so long past and of so little importance that, on advice, I have made reasonable use of such experience in general, refraining however—not without a good deal of self-control—from referring to actual documents addressed to me from Higher Authority in a variety of roles over a wide range of distances.

After the Japanese war, I became (and remain) a civil servant in Her Majesty's Colonial Service. I have reason to be grateful to this Service, and in particular to His Excellency the Governor of Sarawak (Sir Anthony Abell, KCMG) and my colleagues in the Sarawak Government generally, for enabling me to carry on work in Borneo, some of which has been of little direct interest and sometimes of direct irritation to them.

Within this framework I have not consulted anybody in what I have written. The thing has taken a long time simmering, with several boss-shots. What now stands was put to paper on a short leave in the United Kingdom, long after the main event—and to some extent in a deliberate mood of removal therefrom. It would be ungenerous, though, if I did not from the start specifically record obligation to three people who will be mentioned later, but who—unlike many of those mentioned—will be able to read what I may write. These are my colleagues in arms, Lieutenant-Colonel G. S. Carter, DSO, now a Shell senior employee in Brunei; Major W. L. Sochon, DSO, until lately Superintendent of Prisons in Singapore; and my second-in-command during parachute operations to be described, Major Eric Edmeades, MC, who is still my neighbour in Sarawak. If I have anywhere in the later part of this story unwittingly seemed to exaggerate my own part in events, I hope these friends will understand that this is an unfortunate habit of writers—including others far less egocentric than I. No such intention is in my heart, from the start.

WORLD WITHIN

The lack of references to other books in this one is simply because, while many have been written on Borneo—particularly in the past decade—none have dealt with the period of the present experience; nor with its setting of the far uplands and their remarkable peoples. I have gone out of my way to mention any kind of other publication with validity which even touches on these themes. It would have helped had there been more.

I must thank those, especially Colonel Jack Finlay, OBE (now HM Commissioner of Board of Customs), who have read parts of the manuscript and sometimes corrected it with comment—which, where printable, is printed herewith. I must add those who at one time or another gave me ideas or a quiet place to think, namely: Mr and Mrs Denys King-Farlow, Mr Dennis Cohen, Mrs J. L. Lacon. To Miss Grace Carter I am grateful for her secretarial skill and intelligence. To Mr Fred Warburg I owe an apology.

Finally and above all, I owe all such debts as a man may there bear (unashamed) to the Kelabit peoples of Borneo's far interior, led by their old lion, Penghulu Lawai Bisarai, BEM, of Bario, ably supported by Sigang and many others. They have looked after me, in war and peace, for years. It is among these distant mountain people—who incidentally elevate indebtedness almost above all else—that this Borneo story therefore (and properly) begins.

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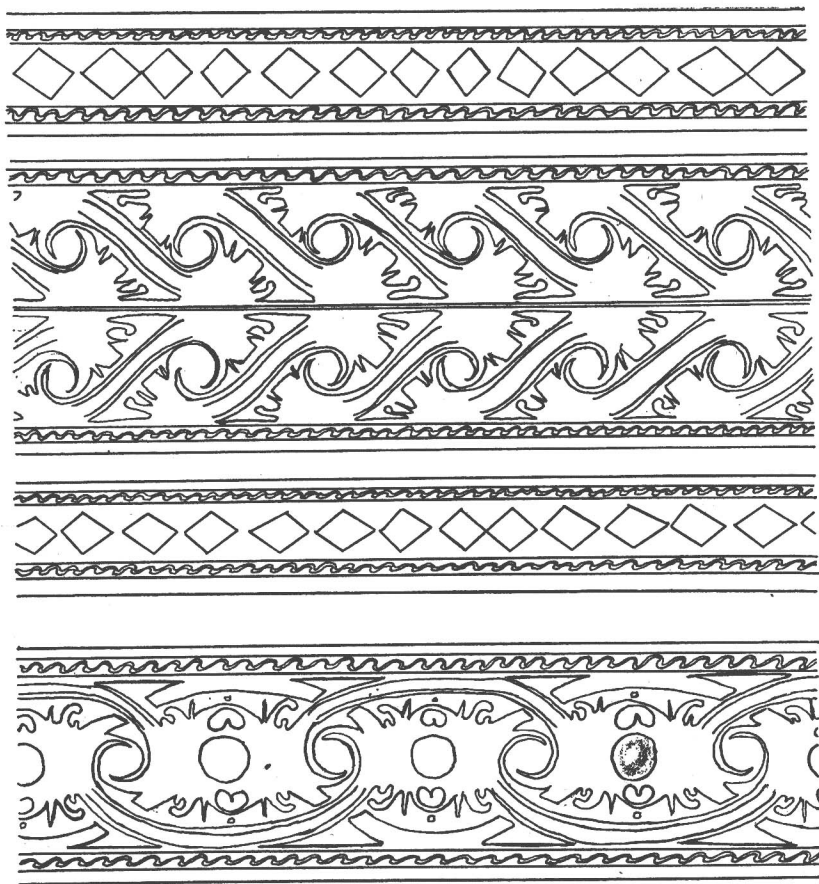
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(These maps have been made, with the help of the Royal Geographical Society, to help tell a sometimes slightly complicated story. Some attention to them is recommended.)

FIGURES

The designs on half-titles and end pages are from everyday Kelabit patterns of tattoo, woodcarving, wall drawing, sword handle, hornbill ivory and so on.



WITHIN AND WITHOUT

'That is the true beginning of our end.
Consider then we come but in despite
We do not come as minding to content you,
Our true intent is. All for your delight,
We are not here.'

Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

Poirot smiled.

'I make a little table—so.' He took a paper from his pocket. 'My idea is this: A murder is an action performed to bring about a certain result.'

'Say that again slowly.'

'It is not difficult.'

'Probably not—but you make it sound so.'

'No, no, it is very simple. Say you want money—you get it when an aunt dies. *Bien*—you perform an action—this is to kill the aunt—and get the result—inherit the money.'

'I wish I had some aunts like that,' sighed Japp.

Agatha Christie (*Death in the Clouds*).

'... being able to give a stupendous house-party,
that would go on for days and days
with everything that anyone could want
to drink, and a medical staff in attendance,
and the biggest jazz orchestras in the city
alternating night and day ...'

Scott Fitzgerald (*his dream*).

FROM THE BEGINNING

1944 . . . *The Plain of Bah*

BY the latter half of 1944 the Japanese had been in occupation of all Borneo—and South-East Asia—three years. By 1944 the first glow of a new order had faded; the signs that this new mastery was only temporary began to multiply rapidly. By the end of 1944 the 'Greater Co-Prosperity' regime was visibly foundering. Before the end of the following year it had been overthrown by force of arms and atoms. It was the singular fortune of the present writer to be the first visible sign, and in some ways symbol, of this transition, reversion or progression, in one of the remotest and until then least known parts of tropical Asia, a part of the world so far within it as to live—up until then—in a sense nearly outside it. Because of the Japs, in this latter part of 1944 the sweet soaring cry of the gibbons, black, white, swift and smart swinging against the canopy green; the faint singing of old ladies making mats by flickering gum-candlelight; and the echoing murmur of wind sniffing out of the cold, mist-laden mountain cliffs down onto the plain below; these and many, many, other noises (tree crash, cicada buzz, mongoose chuckle, the whistle of the blood-red and black hill partridge, grasshoppers, a million moving termites, piglets, bat swing, goat laugh, eagle owl and the legendary noises of the enspirited night—to name a few others) were, for the first time in far upland history, swamped for a few moments by the sound of a great mechanical device.

Lying in the bomb-aimer's blister of an American four-engined Liberator little was to be seen on this first flight. In fact the navigational plot between below and the existing map made, showed us nearly fifty miles out at nowhere. Meanwhile, scarcely dreaming and certainly feeling nothing of the land under our belly, from the clouds something very special was being cooked up for the Kelabits, their dolmens and their dragon jars down below. I was the (unwitting) chef.

If what I am going to try and describe is worth describing in any sort of detail, it is first needful to have a clear idea of what those people down there, set in that monster mountain tangle, were caring about, trying for, fearing, loving, ignoring or avoiding *then*. Without some appreciation of goings-on inside their long-houses or within the vigorous bodies of these tall, strong men and thickset jolly women, anything that follows might be too misleading. But in giving such a picture I am forced to fall back largely upon what I learnt later. For I arrived among these people literally on the bones of my arse; and knowing nil. Indeed, at first they knew more about me, even if only mistakenly. In what follows, therefore, I have first tried to give an accurate picture of the Kelabit way of life at one crucial point in its evolution, developing in a particular kind of isolation, and about to be subject to something of a revolution (which is the subject matter of the rest of the book).

Thus, much of what happened in the inside of Borneo within the year may get a sort of interest and even significance as part of a long and infinitely intricate story—rather than simply a hotch-potch splash of this and that. Anyway, I cannot tell all this story in one book or life, only begin to. If there is a failure here to balance two rather different approaches to living, mine and ‘theirs’, I hope it may be forgiven me. After all, I already have some seventy thick notebooks full of elaborate field observations. No doubt, if I am spared from cirrhosis and the other occupational diseases of the colonial civil servant in the East, the time will come to produce the necessary volumes of apparent scholarship. Until that grinding day, this is no more than an attempt to reconstruct a post-megalithic chapter or two in the history of a little place and a few people including, for better or for worse, the present writer on this subject, within it.

After a good deal of thought and some slight experiment, I have preferred to rely almost *entirely* on my own memory for everything that follows. Otherwise, there is much difficulty (for my sort of ‘scientific’ mind) in avoiding getting bogged down in detail or over-cautious with trivia.

* * *

Psychologically, if not exactly physically, smack in the middle of Borneo lies the Plain of Bah. Encircled in a great bowl of mountains, on the northern edge Murud—at eight thousand feet the highest peak in