



# Into the Heart of Borneo

*Redmond O'Hanlon*

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## **Into the Heart of Borneo** Redmond O'Hanlon

The story of a 1983 journey to the center of Borneo, which no expedition had attempted since 1926.

O'Hanlon, accompanied by friend and poet James Fenton and three native guides brings wit and humor to a dangerous journey.

## **Into the Heart of Borneo Details**

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Author : Redmond O'Hanlon

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# From Reader Review Into the Heart of Borneo for online ebook

## Tony says

I read this book on my first trip to South East Asia. This book (his first) I consider to be O'Hanlon's masterpiece. An absurd, aging, overweight British naturalist with an enthusiasm for nature that borders on the manic, travels with the perfect straight-man, the poet James Fenton, up river deep into the wilds of Borneo, in order to catch a glimpse of the Borneo rhinoceros. The local Dayak guides, masters of the forest, never tire of ridiculing and abusing O'Hanlon and Fenton - "Redmond you're so fats!" - they constantly exclaim, and the grey-bearded Fenton is declared as the wise elder. But the book is more than just the journey - it is full of "fun facts", history, particularly of the naturalist Alfred Wallace, and beautiful descriptions of the rainforest flora and fauna. As travel-writing goes this book is a gem - every bit as funny as Bill Bryson or Mark Twain.

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## Daren says

17/4/16 Retrospectively changed from 3 stars to 4 stars.

I liked it more than 3 stars, and have recently read an excerpt publication of this book - a Penguin 70 called Borneo and the poet.

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## Stina says

3,5\*

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## Forty Something says

Such a treat! On the surface, it is a trip to Borneo, but just as distinctly, the British way of life & culture permeate through. I feel this book took me both to Malaysia and to the UK.

The man put himself through such an ordeal for our reading pleasure, he told his tale in such a delightful and engaging manner and I laughed so many times that a 5-star rating is richly deserved.

I wasn't surprised to find this quote in a wonderful Guardian profile of O'Hanlon (<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/20...> "If I could choose a century to live in," he reflects, "I would certainly choose the 19th, the best of all times, when there was still a whole world to discover."

Actually, I found there was something old-fashioned to his writing (I flipped to the inside cover once to reconfirm the publication year).

It's a book I started missing soon after I finished it.

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## Stephanie says

Fun! Two British guys who had no business mucking about in a tropical jungle decide to go into the center of Malaysia where no European or American had been in fifty years. Armed with cigarettes, alcohol, antibiotics and books, they embark on a nutty, sweaty and very funny trip with three native men as guides. There's lots of singing, drinking, dancing and humor, and a bit of sex. Certainly not an educational book but very entertaining. The writer, a middle-aged academic with a belly is mercilessly teased for being "fats." His friend is prematurely bald but the natives are convinced that he must be ancient because he has no hair. That doesn't stop them from asking the dynamic duo to teach them the 7-step disco, though --- and it goes on from there.

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## Mindy McAdams says

Reading this book inspired me to book a 22-day trekking tour of Malaysian Borneo, the fabled land of Iban headhunters and the magnificent hornbill. O'Hanlon -- an Englishman, literary scholar and amateur naturalist -- undertook an 1800s-style expedition into the jungle in 1983 with three local Iban guides and one English friend, a poet. About their adventure he wrote this thoroughly enjoyable book, filled with laugh-out-loud humor and wondrous descriptions of birds, rivers, forests, the incredible equatorial heat, and all the squeamish details that those 19th-century reports politely left out.

Part of the delight in reading this account comes from O'Hanlon's quirky personality and his deep enthusiasm for nature, and a large part comes from his portrayal of his guides as intelligent men who find in their two English charges an unending source of amusement. O'Hanlon exaggerated nothing. I thought of him often while I walked on muddy paths and rode in narrow longboats in Sarawak, sweat streaming from every pore, drinking in the sounds and smells of the jungle.

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## Kay says

An enjoyable travelogue in the manner of Eric Newby, Bill Bryson, and other self-admittedly cack-handed travelers. The wonderfully ill-prepared O'Hanlon and his companion, the even *more* ill-prepared James Fenton (a poet), trek through Borneo, where countless dangers could befall them (but happily don't, thanks to the deft assistance of three native guides). True, there are leeches and dreadful food, not to mention some close calls, but O'Hanlon describes these misadventures with high humor.

Even more humorous are accounts of the epic feasts and drunken parties at native villages along the way. O'Hanlon excels when describing the tribal people he and Fenton meet. And while it's clear that he really doesn't know what the hell is going on half the time, his three faithful guides - Leon, Inghai, and Dana - certainly do, and it's the portraits of these three in particular that stay with the reader. The guides are often amused, and more than occasionally irritated by O'Hanlon and Fenton's incompetence, and a sort of odd humor results from O'Hanlon's recounting of their solicitousness for their inexperienced charges. Here's Leon, for example, looking after 'Redmon':

"Redmon," he said, *sotto voce*, "I hopes you and Jams not go with hotel girls?"

"I haven't seen any hotel girls."

"They on top floor. Very naughties."

"Do you go with hotel girls?"

"No Redmon," said Leon with great seriousness, "there is new diseases here. Your spear it rots. You go to hospital, they look at your spear, you take medicine. We have a word for this diseases. I not know it in English. We Iban, in our language, we call it *syphilis*."

It's these exchanges and the relationship that develops between O'Hanlon, Fenton, and the three Iban guides that provides the richest material in the book, but to O'Hanlon's credit his humor is never the expense of the guides, though the two younger Iban clearly have something of the scamp about them. O'Hanlon even seems in awe of the older non-English speaking guide, Dana, an Iban of some stature who agrees to accompany them.

Of course, there's plenty of room for cross-cultural misunderstanding along the way, but O'Hanlon, to his credit, never slips into condescension. On the contrary, if anything his self-deprecation seems almost ingrained. Still, O'Hanlon's sharp eye for detail, whether it's flora or fauna or the customs of the people he encounters, give lie to his buffoonery, making this a fascinating as well as amusing travel tale.

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## **Juha says**

This classic travel adventure recounts a 1983 trip into, well, the heart of Borneo by the author, Redmond O'Hanlon, his friend the poet James Fenton, and three local Iban guides. The purpose of the trip is, ostensibly, to try to rediscover the Borneo Rhinoceros that is believed to be extinct. The story evolves around the unlikely party's boat trip upriver from Kuching on South China Sea to Mt. Batu Tiban. The trip is at times dangerous, as they traverse rapids and face other natural challenges en route. Along the way the troupe comes across other ethnic groups—some of whom bear generations old grudges against the Iban—and engage in riotous celebrations with them. The book includes much interesting information about the people who live in inland Borneo. Redmond O'Hanlon is a naturalist by training (Oxford) and was for years the natural history editor for the Times Literary Supplement, so inevitably the book contains frequent passages describing the nature—especially bird life—that they encounter. The sympathetic Iban will have many a good laugh on account of the two clumsy Britons. In the end they confess that they never believed they'd be able to complete the trip, O'Hanlon being too fat and Fenton immensely old. O'Hanlon observes the world around him with a keen eye for detail and writes it all down in fabulously engaging prose. His sense of humour and self-deprecating style, as well as openness and empathy guarantee that this travel memoir is a definite winner.

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## **Anna Kander says**

Read this for a book club.

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## Jason says

My good friends Natalie and Dave gave me this book just before I left to live in Penninsular Malaysia, and it has really served to pique my interest in the country I now live in. I found this to be an informative and well-written book, and the author definitely knew his way around Borneo and its customs.

My quibbles with the book did slightly detract from my overall enjoyment of the narrative. O'Hanlon had the tendency to go on and on about different birds he encountered along the way, as well as describing - at length - the birds he wanted to encounter but didn't. This book was not meant to be about birds, and so when he did go on tangents about them, I found myself losing interest. My other issue was that O'Hanlon, when he ran out of narrative and character, would often fall back on long passages from other authors' works. This could really add to the ideas O'Hanlon was trying to get across, but it did not speak much for his ability to tell a riveting tale on his own.

With that said, the information about the different ethnic groups like Sea Dyaks and Kayan peoples was fascinating, and the journey itself was riveting. I just wish there was more of it, and perhaps Dana, Leon, Ingy Pingy, and O'Hanlon could have killed and beheaded the poet James Fenton so as to rid themselves (and readers) of his pretentiousness. I'd have left Fenton in the jungle.

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## João says

Uma equipa de exploradores inesperada, constituída por um poeta laureado (James Fenton) e um especialista em literatura inglesa do século XIX (Redmond O'Hanlon, o autor), partem para os confins da selva inexplorada à procura do elusivo rinoceronte do Bornéu. Vão numa canoa, guiada por três homens das tribos iban, através de rápidos cada vez mais difíceis de ultrapassar. Mas são dois "sportmen" ingleses, que encaram fleumaticamente todas as contrariedades com bom-humor e sem lamentações. Apesar dos desafios que têm pela frente, serpentes venenosas, picadas dolorosas de formigas, possibilidade de inundações rápidas ou mesmo de se depararem com alguma tribo perdida dos temíveis canibais que habitavam a zona, James segue tranquilamente na canoa lendo poesia clássica e Redmond tem sempre capacidade de se rir das encrencas em que se vê metido.

Mas o seu deslumbramento pelas maravilhas que encontram na floresta virgem é contagioso, as nuvens de borboletas que os cobrem em busca de se alimentarem delicadamente da sua transpiração, o voo dos casais de calaus por entre as copas das árvores, os ruídos e as cores do despertar da vida a cada manhã. É com o coração apertado que lemos a descrição do último olhar apressado do autor ao reduto mais longínquo e virgem onde chegou e de onde tem de fugir apressadamente devido à subida rápida das águas do rio. É como a lágrima que o rei mouro deixou escorrer pela face quando, do alto da estrada que o levará a África, olha pela última vez para a sua amada Alhambra, que deixa para trás, depois de derrotado pelos reis católicos.

E esse mundo selvagem e belo que O'Hanlon visitou em 1983 já desapareceu. Nas fotos de satélite das aplicações de mapas da Google e da Microsoft vêem-se hoje estradas que penetram até às zonas mais isoladas e zonas de exploração madeireira e clareiras de árvores cortadas na floresta e barragens. Os delicados ecossistemas que tanto maravilharam o autor e nos maravilharam a nós desapareceram, talvez para sempre.

Nota: se puder, leia na versão original, em inglês; esta edição tem erros, sobretudo muitos erros de pontuação, que prejudicam desagradavelmente a leitura.

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## Boyd says

Totally hilarious. Surprisingly, the celebrated British poet James Fenton, whom you'd think would be the albatross on this junket, comes across as rather better equipped to handle Borneo's rigors than does designated adventurer Redmond O'Hanlon. But really, neither "fats Redmon" nor "old Jams"(NB, whippersnappers: he was 34 at the time) had any business traipsing through the jungle, and the fact that both emerged from the experience in reasonably good shape is nearly a miracle. The many throw-up-making elements here--giant leeches rearing up like cobras and and swiveling around in search of their next meal; the horror of roasted monitor lizard (and who couldn't have guessed that?); a festive bag of heads dangling casually from the ceiling of one of the long houses--not only don't hamper the book's appeal but enhance it. I'd never dream of going within a million miles of Borneo myself, but I'm awfully glad Redmond O'Hanlon and James Fenton did, and lived to tell the tale.

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## Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

Humor can be found on the mere incongruity of the person with the place he finds himself in. That is why we enjoy watching those Tarzan-in-the-big-city themed movies: the bewildered savage treating modern civilization as just another type of jungle and behaving just as he was before in his former habitat.

This is a travelogue which did a Tarzan in reverse. Two Englishmen, one a poet (James Fenton) and the other a naturalist (the author, Redmond O'Hanlon) placed themselves in the interior jungles of Borneo and became the objects of hilarity among the native people they met, including their three native guides who distinguish them from each other with a perfect description: one is fat, and the other is old (I don't remember which is which).

One of them (the poet, I think) almost drowned in a river and even that was funny. I thought that even if he actually did die, considering time's capacity to mitigate all sorrows, I believe it would still have been possible to remember him now with fondness and laugh with him for the hilarious adventures he had before the mighty river took him in its bosom and fed his body to the crocodiles.

They had lots of glorious moments, things I know I can only imagine or dream about. Like when wild butterflies enveloped the author's entire body, competing with each other in sucking the moisture in his clothes, and the perspiration on his skin, and even his urine on the ground. Or, the bedtime they had like this:

"Slipping under the mosquito net, I fastened myself into the dark-green camouflage SAS tube. It seemed luxuriously comfortable. You had to sleep straight out like a rifle; but the ants, swarming along the poles, rearing up on their back legs to look for an entry, and the mosquitoes, whining and singing outside the various tunes of their species in black shifting clouds, could not get in.

""Eeeeeee--ai---yack yack yack yack yack!" Something screamed in my ear, with brain-shredding force. And then everyone joined in.

""Eeeeeee--ai--yack yack yack yack yack te yooooo!" answered every other giant male cicada, maniacally vibrating the tymbals, drumskin membranes in their cavity amplifiers, the megaphones built into their bodies.

"Shut up!" I shouted.

"Wah Wah Wah Wah Wah!" said four thousand frogs.

"Stop it at once!" yelled James.

"Clatter clitter clatter" went our mess-tins over the shingle, being nosed clean by three shrews.

"The Iban laughed. The river grew louder in the darkness. Something hooted. Something screamed in earnest further off. Something shuffled and snuffled around the discarded rice and fish bits flung in a bush from our plates. A porcupine? A civet? A ground squirrel? The long-tailed giant rat? Why not a Clouded leopard? Or, the only really dangerous mammal in Borneo, the long-clawed, short-tempered Sun bear?

"I switched off the torch and tried to sleep. But it was no good. The decibel-level was way over the limit allowed in discotheques. And, besides, the fire-flies kept flicking their own torches on and off; and some kind of phosphorescent fungus glowed in the dark like a forty-watt bulb."

What is it that one wouldn't give up to experience a night like that?

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### **Britt Vasarhelyi says**

This is one of two books I always keep nearby so I can read a few pages when I'm in between activities.

It is absolutely hysterical, droll, meaty, and a dazzling window on a life almost none of us will ever experience. If I tell you that a poet in Borneo adopts as a mascot a parasite that has invaded his body, you'll think I'm nuts. I'm afraid you'll just have to read this amazing book to disprove me.

Actually, my copy has gone missing and I've torn up bookshelves, random stacks of books and hiding places trying to find it. My copy, which I found at a yard sale (where I seem to pick up a lot of reading material), is about as dog-eared as it can get, so I may have to order a new book even if I do find it.

In the meantime, hope you'll want to share this unique reading experience. Your only regret will be that you haven't encountered it sooner.

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### **Ann Michael says**

a bit snarky but hilarious. O'Hanlon's depiction of James Fenton is really rather appealingly odd...a collection of inside jokes and quasi-macho derring-do, drily told. I don't know why I find this so funny, but I do.

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