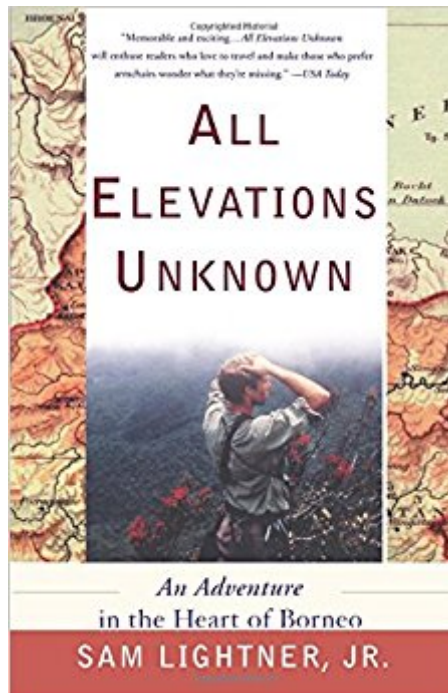


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All Elevations Unknown: An Adventure In The Heart Of Borneo



Synopsis

“Sam Lightner, Jr., combines two tales of adventure, one historic and the other modern-day in his page-turner . . . With its rich sense of place and history, *All Elevations Unknown* offers a surprisingly fresh twist to an adventure-climbing tale.” —*Climbing Magazine*

In the spring of 1999, armed with little more than a description from a book and a map labeled “all elevations unknown,” Sam Lightner and his German rock-climbing buddy, Volker, found themselves deep in the jungles of Borneo on a mission to climb a mountain that was only rumored to exist. What little they knew about the mountain they had learned from the memoirs of Major Tom Harrisson, a British World War II soldier who in 1945 had been assigned the near-impossible mission of parachuting blindly into the thick Borneo rainforest where the natives had a grisly habit of cutting off heads to try to reclaim the island for the Allies. A captivating, utterly original combination of travel adventure memoir and historical re-creation, *All Elevations Unknown* charts Lightner’s exhilarating and at times harrowing quest to ascend the mountain Batu Lawi in the face of leeches, vipers, and sweat bees, and to keep his team together in one of the earth’s most treacherous uncharted pockets. Along the way, he reconstructs a fascinating historical narrative that chronicles Tom Harrisson’s adventures there during the war and illuminates an astonishing piece of forgotten World War II history. Rife with suspense and vivid detail, the two intertwining tales open up the island of Borneo, its people, and its history in a powerful, unforgettable way, taking adventure writing to new heights.

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Customer Reviews

In March 1945, a smart but rowdy British officer named Tom Harrisson parachuted into the Borneo Highlands and set about organizing an army of headhunters to battle the Japanese invaders. He knew the difficult country a little, having been there on a scientific expedition before the war, but now, "shepherded to the island by the world's most lucrative sponsor, the Dogs of War," he had to learn its secrets, and quickly. In 1958, Harrisson wrote a memoir, *World Within*, chronicling his time on the island. Looking for new places to explore, Wyoming rock-scrambler Sam Lightner and his German climbing partner happened on Harrisson's book, studied it closely, and, with four other "dirt-bag" climbers, went off to Borneo to find the peak of their dreams in the cloud forests, in country that maps "tinted gray and labeled 'All Elevations Unknown'." Battling unusual elements--including having to "cough up the larvae of *echinococcus*" and dodge giant snakes, to say nothing of the area's still-active headhunting bands--they found it, scaled the spire called Batu Lawi, and lived to tell the tale. Their exploits form the heart of Lightner's good-natured narrative, which draws on Harrisson's own account of jungle warfare to become a work of history as much as outdoors travel. Climbers, students of World War II, and armchair adventurers alike will enjoy his report. --Gregory McNamee --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

First-time author Lightner, a well-known rock climber, presents a memorable if somewhat problematic travel-adventure memoir of his 1999 climb up Borneo's Batu Lawi, an all-but-unknown peak in a rough jungle. He approaches the peak armed only with regional maps, none of which show the mountain, and a book called *World Within*, a travel memoir published in 1958 by Tom Harrisson, a British officer who parachuted onto the mountain during WWII to establish an Allied base. Drawn to Harrisson's book, Lightner intersperses chapters about his climb with chapters retelling Harrisson's story, building dramatic tension to the climaxes of both tales. He occasionally refers to his funding from a hiking supply company, and one sometimes wonders how sponsorship affected the story, though to Lightner's credit, the narrative seems free of commercial agenda. More problematic are the imagined dialogues between Harrisson and his colleagues; Lightner admits they are based on second- and third-hand accounts, and the conceit feels strained. "Although it is not pure history, it comes very close," Lightner claims. Harrisson settled on Borneo with a Kelabit (a local ethnicity) wife and helped the island improve its educational and political structures. But Lightner's own story, his natural flair for writing and the inspiration he derives from Harrisson's life would have been sufficiently interesting to support a more traditional approach to Harrisson's tale. As it is, though, this remains a wonderful introduction to an island and culture known to few people. 3 maps. (On-sale date: June 12) Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text

refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I ran across a copy of this book at a hotel in Bali. Since I was looking for an outdoor adventure book, the subject really intrigued me. Even though the book is 17 years old I was fascinated by the description of Borneo and the parallel story line about world war 2. I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys reading about an exotic land where very few people will ever get to experience firsthand.

Sam Lightner's tale of his 1999 climb up Borneo's Batu Lawi is a wonderful mix of modern adventure and historical retelling of Major Tom Harrison's 1958 book *World Within*. His story is a classic first-climb adventure in which he and his friends attempt to be the first (as far as they knew) to climb a mystical spire deep in the heart of Borneo. Lightner learned of the peak from an obscure reference in Tom Harrison's *World Within* and uses this text as both his guide to the land and the people. In reading about his adventure, you gain insight into not only the heart of a true adventurer trying to step foot where few have ever been and the hardships involved in such undertakings. You'll certainly think twice about sponsorship of your next adventure, especially any video documentation after hearing of his conflicts with his camera crew. At the same time, you'll gain a love of the people and land of Borneo. This tale is perfect for those who love adventure as well as learning the history of a people and their land.

Although Lightner's account of his climb up a mountain in Borneo is not in the same league as Eric Hansen's *STRANGER IN THE FOREST* (an account of his 3 month trek across Borneo in the 1970's--a great book), this book's historical accounting of WW 2 battles fought in Borneo (based upon the biography of Maj. Harrison) gave me more insight into the tribes and history of this magical land. Like other readers, I found Lightner's writings about Maj. Harrison's battles with the Japanese soldiers far more interesting than the snippy arguments he details between himself and the film crew that documents his climb. It was amusing (as a woman) to see that a group of men can be just as catty to one another, but Lightner goes into far too much detail about these highly personal spats, and many times, leaves me wanting more detail about the flora, the sights, the sounds and smells and to learn more about the indigenous guides that the author is traveling with. This book made me want to read more about Maj. Harrison's amazing and brave liberation of Borneo because Harrison, like author Eric Hansen 30+ years later, fell in love with the tribal people of Borneo; he grew to respect their customs, and in many instances their ecological reverence for the rainforest in which

they dwelt. Hopefully, the biography of Maj. Harrison will not remain out of print for too long. If you're interested in climbing, the rainforest or in Borneo, this book is worth your time.

This is a good book, but not a great one, undermined by three difficulties, not all of them the author's fault. Problem number one is an excess of hype on the part of the publisher; Lightner's interweaving of two stories, even if separated by more than 50 years, isn't revolutionary. It is entertaining, however, and it works nicely. It's just oversold. Nevertheless, the dual stories make the book. Lightner correctly realizes that his own climbing tale is simply too thin. His other main problem is that the World War II story is far more interesting, especially since most people have no clue about how the war was fought on Borneo. (My own reference library on World War II devotes two sentences to the island: the Japanese captured it; later the Allies took it back.) Lightner has done a wonderful job of bringing this little-known story to life, but by so doing, he emphasizes the thinness of his own tale, whose central conflict turns out to be between himself and the film crew who helped finance the expedition. The "video guys," as he calls them, want things in exchange for their money that change the nature of the climbers' goals. That's interesting...but not as much so as a world war. The third problem is that in his efforts to bring the story to life, Lightner's gone farther than needed, by fabricating dialog, characters' reactions to each other, and additional perceptual material to fill in gaps in the narrative. He admits this, but it's an ill-considered approach to a story with drama enough to stand on its own if he'd made it clear which material is based on someone's memoirs, and which is interpolated. Not doing it in the traditional manner leaves the reader wondering how much of the story is real, and how much is guesswork. Worse, it casts doubt on Lightner's own tale. Every time he intercuts from the present to the past, he does so by having himself reflect on the World War II story. The third time he did this, I wondered: Is this also a device? Might he have been napping at the time, rather than thinking about World War II? And if so, what else in the tale is a device? None of this destroys the verisimilitude of the whole, but it does undermine it. But that said, it's a good book, recommended to those with an interest in adventure travel, history, and to a lesser extent, climbing.

Something about a first ascent completely engulfs my imagination and attention. This read is no different. Lightner's account of his Borneo expedition actually propelled my interest in climbing...so much that I tested the waters of the climbing world within two years of reading this book. Now, if I am not climbing, I am training for a climb. I can honestly state that this book has significantly impacted my life interests and changed the course of my being. Such an inspiring piece of work is a

rare occurrence indeed.

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