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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ HISTORICAL

Golden Dreams of Borneo

Alex Ling
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Lush narrative, intellectual conversation, and emotional introspection help us experience an exotic locale through the eyes of its people.

In a weighty tome that spans more than one hundred years from 1800 to 1918, the drive to succeed on a gold-rich island is the motivating force behind multiple characters in this admirable undertaking by Alex Ling. Sarawak is the focus, a northwest section of Borneo governed by a family known as the White Rajahs from 1841 to 1946.

Extensive research, along with genuine passion for the subject matter, is apparent on every page. Typical of historical fiction, some of which is the creative output of a lifetime, this book explores every aspect of a region from an analytical as well as a purely descriptive standpoint. Ling writes: “In the cave, they saw a flock of black furry yoga devotees—bats hanging upside down from the roof of the chambers. Little cave crickets, Bidi cave crabs—still with their eyes intact—spiders and centipedes, all with long legs or feelers were happily feasting on the guano.”

Lush narrative, intellectual conversation, and emotional introspection are vehicles that convey the experience of an exotic locale from the perspective of people from an unfamiliar past. The Chinese, British, and Malays sought a better existence in this uncharted territory, hoping to conquer, even if only a small piece, for personal advancement.

Cultures clashed in a sequestered foreign environment, which was decidedly dangerous. Sarawak could not be called a land of opportunity. Natives resisted the blatant encroachment on their land, leading to conflict. Tropical diseases, virgin jungles, and dreaded headhunters—seemingly insurmountable obstacles—faced the educated and uneducated alike.

Two characters stand out from the countless individuals portrayed: Charles Brooke, the leader of Sarawak, a controversial man who desired to civilize the native islanders without subjecting them to exploitation, and Stephen Young, a British graduate in pursuit of adventure. Parts of the story emphasize Young’s private life and his relationships with women. Explicit sex and tender romance add spice to this war-torn plot, revealing the human emotions that govern a young man’s outlook on the future: “Deep down in his heart, he felt Mei Ling’s and his own destiny would meet at a certain point. But he knew one could not just live on love and fresh air. Only if he were rich, perhaps, things could be made to happen earlier. Important decisions could only be made by those who were in a suitable position or who could afford to make them.”

A lawyer with a special interest in gold mining, Ling holds graduate and postgraduate degrees from Cambridge University in England. His educational background clearly enhances his depiction of Young.

At nearly eight hundred pages, *Golden Dreams of Borneo* may be a daunting undertaking for a light reader, but it’s a worthwhile endeavor for energetic historians and anyone fascinated with the period. Exceptional effort is visible throughout this painstaking work.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (October 22, 2013)

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