

Book Review: *Semut*, by Christine Helliwell

Peter Knight

I received an email from Christine Helliwell in May of 2020 wondering whether there was any chance of obtaining an article that had appeared in the New Zealand Surveyor in December 1946, and for which she had been searching to no avail.¹ She wrote that she was at the Australian National University in Canberra and writing a book, "... on an Australian special operation that took place behind Japanese lines in Borneo during WWII. The operation's commanding officer was a New Zealand surveyor named G.S. (Toby) Carter, who worked in Borneo for Shell Oil before the war. He was a remarkable man who has never received his proper due." I called our National Operations Manager Jan Lawrence in Wellington, who was able to reach for the issue in question from the bookcase in her office. In gratitude for receiving the article Christine kindly sent me a proof of her book *Semut, The Untold Story of a Secret Australian Operation in WWII Borneo*.

I am aware of three published book reviews of *Semut*², and another by Gordon Andreassend is to appear in Survey and Spatial in March 2022. These reviews serve well to describe much of the book's coverage of the military operation conducted by Z Special Unit during the months prior to the Japanese surrender in 1945, and led by Major Gordon 'Toby' Carter. Twenty-three other New Zealanders, and Australian surveyor Keith Barrie were among the hundreds involved in the parachuting of guerrilla soldiers into the upland jungle of Sarawak 1000 miles distant from the nearest allied base. Helliwell, a New Zealander herself, has helped provide new and overdue recognition in both Australia and New Zealand of the heroic achievements of the Semut operatives. Grateful for the reviews so far, I would like to take a somewhat different approach in my review, noting that Helliwell has not only given us a historical account of the first order, but her breadth of knowledge, and understanding and experience as an anthropologist has produced a

multilayered book that I believe full of meaning relevant to our relationships with place, our relationships with each other—particularly cross-cultural relationships—and perhaps something about transcending or transforming the influences on our thought attributable to the societies in which we live.

Helliwell describes the forest environment in which the story takes place.

Massive trees, often hundreds of years olds, blanketed vast areas, their huge symmetrical trunks rising like sculpted pillars before proliferating far overhead into a canopy of green, broken only here and there by patches of light torn by those that had fallen. Climbers such as lianas and rattans used the trees as supports, twining themselves round and round trunks and trailing from branches in endless matted webs, in some cases—as with the aptly named strangling fig—choking their hosts to eventual death in a tremendous efflorescence of sun-seeking foliage and aerial roots.

Ferns dotted the ground as well as tree trunks and the canopy itself, creating their own miraculous hanging gardens extending up to several metres in diameter. Mushrooms and other fungi grew in profusion among the rotting vegetation and undergrowth of the forest floor, often displaying a vivid, almost incandescent beauty. And everything was forever wet, captive to the frequent downpours and incomparable humidity that characterise this equatorial region

In spite of the shadows cast by the giant trees, the jungles were places of interminable sound and movement. Birds flashed and darted overhead, Monkeys swung themselves from branch to branch with astonishing agility, and butterflies—sometime huge and brilliantly coloured—fluttered in murky glades. Not all life here was benevolent; crocodiles skulked around rivers, streams and the frequent marshy areas, and snakes—including the deadly king cobra, which can ‘stand’ to a height of a metre or two—lurked out of sight. Add to these various species of deer, wild pigs, sun bears, the beautiful secretive clouded leopards, orangutans and their relative the gibbons, and you gain some sense of the bewildering abundance of the life the jungles sheltered.³

An idea of the topography is provided by the Encyclopaedia Britannica:

The general character of the island is mountainous. The highest peak is Mt. Kinabalu 13,455 ft. A great jagged outcrop of granite emerging out of a sandstone formation almost from sea level to form

the highest mountain in southeast Asia and one of the splendid mountains of the world.

Seen from the summit of Kinabalu or any other of the high mountains, Borneo appears as a confused, irregular tangle of ranges, hillocks and great winding valleys with none of the symmetry characteristic of Burma or Java, Sumatra or Malaya. Thus it is one of the hardest countries in the world to move around in on foot. To follow a compass bearing is an unbearable experience; it will inevitably involve crossing and recrossing stream after stream and climbing hillsides, gullies and landslides in wearisome succession. The stranger to Borneo who is fortunate enough to get off the beaten track is usually irritated by the tortuous trails which the native peoples use to travel vast areas of jungle. But from centuries of experience and an unsurpassed feeling for jungle life, these people—once head-hunters, now peaceable—have usually worked out the best routes, however indirect these may appear.⁴

The jungle of Borneo is the home of the many and various groups of indigenous Dayak people who have inhabited the forest for untold centuries. Helliwell speaks of, “... the astounding intricacy and beauty of their carvings, weavings and painting—which now sells at staggering prices in the galleries of the West—and the genius of their environmental adaptations.”⁵ As a student Helliwell lived in the jungle for 20 months in a Dayak longhouse. Over the course of many years and much time spent in Borneo she has become widely recognised for her knowledge of its indigenous people. This knowledge of people and place is embedded in *Semut*; it is not promoted or overstated, but accounts for the creative insight that gives the story its depth and range.

Helliwell states that, “My aim is not only to describe and assess the operation, but also to convey something of how it felt for the operatives—and also sometimes the Dayaks—who took part.”⁶ The *Semut* operation was an incredible situation in anthropological terms bringing together warriors from two completely different races in an extraordinary balance. In the jungle there was no question of the superiority of the Dayak in almost every facet of guerrilla warfare and the total dependence of the *Semut* operatives upon them. What the Dayak must have known, however, about these awkward men, was that the *Semut* soldiers were connected to great powers, as evidenced by their, dramatic arrival from the air, and their ability to summon further men and materials by the same means. The great powers, were nevertheless very distant, and the operatives were humble enough to understand that an equal exchange was taking place. The emotional experience of this exchange is one that Helliwell would like to convey to the reader. This is because it is

our personal experiences, registered in our hearts and minds that constitute the thing we value the most, the truth. We cannot deny that we are emotional beings, creatures of love, and that this is where the real power lies. This is not to say that personal experience may not be corrupted, and become false, but when that happens it is most likely to be due to our need to conform to the meanings and interpretations prevalent in our society.

Helliwell shows Carter to be a true hero and to have defended the Dayak with every ounce of his power and strength. Working with Carter's army the Dayak would, '... regain their freedom'.⁷ Carter notes that, '... we were never short of local food supplies ...', and that the Dayak were, '... Nature's gentlemen and the soul of hospitality to the traveller'.⁸ Carter also informs us, in his humble way that, 'It is not possible for a white man to carry heavy loads for long in the tropics ...', and that Dayak porters, including women porters carried their packs for them. However, in the same article for the *New Zealand Surveyor* in 1946, Carter refers to the Japanese as, '... a barbarous Asiatic race',⁹ and felt that the Dayak, '... held no half-baked ideas of political independence'.¹⁰ In the latter two quotes Carter's tone of superiority is false. I am not disparaging Carter, we are all a mixture of truth and falsity, I am signalling that when reviewers speak of Helliwell, setting the record straight,¹¹ it is more than historical accuracy that comes into play. Helliwell tells of certain Dayak warriors receiving decorations (as did Carter) after the war for their roles in Semut. The recognition and reward are good and honourable (hence true) gestures toward the Dayak, but neither empire, commonwealth nor the independent nation states of Malaysia or Indonesia who govern the forests of Borneo, have preserved the forests upon which the Dayak depend (and hence have not been true to the Dayak).¹² Many of us may feel how small and vulnerable we are, how much we need the Dayak, how wonderful the relationship is both culturally and personally, between us and the forest dwellers. It is the false superiority of power wielded from a distance that needs overcoming, and a true story might go some way toward accomplishing this.

The adventure Helliwell writes about is not over; the struggle for survival of the characters of *Semut* is the struggle now being waged all over the world, and in all our hearts. As in Semut we must accept the help of those who know how to live in ways that might allow us creative insight for our future. From facts to meaning is a transition Christine encourages when she writes that she is interested in conveying her story in such a way that we might share the feelings of the participants.¹³ She wants us to share these feelings not for our entertainment—though that is not excluded—but as part of the thrust of the book in its anthropological sense. The book carries an important message, and Helliwell has written it so well the message has a chance of reaching a great many at this critical time.

Notes

¹ Carter, G. S. (December 1946). *Sarawak Adventure*. New Zealand Surveyor. Institute of New Zealand Surveyors. **19** (3): 246–257.

² Byrne, Peter (2021) *Semut The untold story of a secret Australian operation in WWII Borneo*, *Position*, Issue 115, Oct/Nov 2021. P.41. https://issuu.com/theintermediagroup/docs/position_115_october-november_2021?fr=sOTc3NjQyODQxNjI

McRae, Andrew (2022) *Book details young NZ soldiers' role in foiling Japanese army in Borneo*, Radio New Zealand, 8:23pm 16th January 2020. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/459655/book-details-young-nz-soldiers-role-in-foiling-japanese-army-in-borneo>

Hill, David (2021) *Jungle Saviours*, Listener, December 18th 2021, Issue 51, 2021, p.57

³ Helliwell, Christine (2021) *Semut, The untold story of a secret Australian operation in WWII Borneo*, Michael Joseph, Penguin Random House Australia, p.17.

⁴ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1969, Volume 3, p.961-962.

⁵ Helliwell, *Semut*, 27.

⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁷ Ibid., 251.

⁸ Ibid, 251.

⁹ Carter, *Sarawak Adventure*, 246.

¹⁰ Ibid., 251.

¹¹ Hill, *Jungle Saviours*, 57 (see note 2 above).

¹² 'In the 1980s and 1990s, the forests of Borneo were levelled at a rate unprecedented in human history, burned, logged and cleared, and commonly replaced with agriculture. The deforestation continued through the 2000s at a slower pace, alongside the expansion of palm oil plantations. Half of the annual global tropical timber procurement is from Borneo. Palm oil plantations are rapidly encroaching on the last remnants of primary rainforest. Much of the forest clearance is illegal.' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deforestation_in_Borneo. Accessed February 2022.

¹³ Helliwell, *Semut*, p.15.