

BOOK REVIEW: *In Trouble Again: A Journey
Between the Orinoco and the Amazon*

by Alden Clayton

In Trouble Again: A Journey Between the Orinoco and the Amazon by Redmond O'Hanlon. 1992, Random House, New York. \$11.00 (paperback).

"Escape civilization, but not the comforts of civilization" is the headline in a current nature tour brochure. *In Trouble Again* is a book about escaping from civilization *and* leaving behind—totally and absolutely—all of the comforts of civilization. If you have nurtured a secret desire to see the wildlife of the Amazon basin the "native way," let's say three months along the river systems between the Orinoco and the Amazon in a dugout canoe with native guides, read this book. It will change your mind and put an end to such dreams forever. If you have already made plans, and it is too late to cancel, do not read this book. It will only double your suffering before and during the trip.

This is not a trip for people who worry about diseases, particularly exotic and dangerous infections.

There is Chagas' disease, for instance, produced by a protozoan, *Tripnozoma crusii*, and carried by various species of Assassin bugs which bite you on the face or neck and then, gorged, defecate next to the puncture. When you scratch the resulting itch you rub the droppings and their cargo of protozoa into your bloodstream; between one and twenty years later you begin to die from incurable damage to the heart and brain.

Nor is this a trip for people whose tolerance for insects is low and who wish to be aware of them only on the outside of a well-screened back porch.

We tied the dugouts on long ropes to a tree, climbed the sloping ramp of granite which led to the little cliff, and made a shelter in the forest behind it. Huge flies with zebra-striped rear ends zigzagged everywhere and landed on everything; and tiny, yellow-brown flies settled all over our hands and faces, crawled into our eyes and nostrils, and clustered at the edges of our mouths. "Sweat bees," said Juan.

People who only enjoy rain through a window pane should not do this trip.

The rain drummed on the canvas as if each drop were trying to get at us, personally. It rebounded off the leaves and the trunks and sliced into the shelter at a thousand different angles. Fragmented droplets snapped across the ground sheet . . . Dawn merely lightened the lines of falling water from grey-black to grey, and through the gap at the end of my hammock I could see out for no more than ten or

twelve yards. I unwrapped myself from the SAS groundsheet, a defence against the big biting flies, whose proboscides, I had discovered, lance through cotton shirts and hammocks and trousers without a pause, but buckle against canvas: I sat up and drew a deep breath of wet, rancid air. Already covered in microscopic algae and fungus, the hammock and mosquito net and I and everyone else were beginning to smell of rotten butter.

Finally, this is not a trip for people who enjoy observing wildlife but who do not necessarily enjoy eating what they have just seen—caiman, river turtle, anaconda, armadillo, agouti, curassow, peccary, tapir (tapir steak is a rare treat), and (somewhat reluctantly) monkey flesh. These are the native bill-of-fare.

The title of *In Trouble Again* traces to Redmond O'Hanlon's previous book, *Into the Heart of Borneo*, a publication that established his reputation as a travel writer with sensitivity to nature and a sense of humor. O'Hanlon is a product of Oxford, a fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, and natural history editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*.

When we first pick up on O'Hanlon, he is planning another adventure. In the tradition of the great British explorers of the nineteenth century it will be a journey of discovery and hardship. O'Hanlon's goal lies in the Amazon basin. His knowledge of natural history and his special fascination with birds are ideal attributes for such an undertaking.

The size of the Amazon and the amount of water contained in its huge drainage area are difficult to fully comprehend. The statistics are staggering. The Amazon's drainage area of 2,280,000 square miles is almost two-thirds the size of Canada, and it contains two-thirds of all the river water of the world. Transportation within this vast basin is almost exclusively and not surprisingly on the surface of the water. There are 14,000 miles of navigable waters (boats and large ships of various kinds) and several million miles through swamps and forests that are seasonally usable for travel by native dugouts and canoes.

The Amazon is the world's largest river. At flood its mouth may be 300 miles wide, and up to 500 billion cubic feet of water per day are emptied into the Atlantic with a current so strong that the river water flows 125 miles into the ocean before it begins to mix with salt water. Another way to think about the meaning of these numbers is to relate 500 billion cubic feet of water to human water consumption. One day of this flow would sustain New York City's freshwater use for nine years. The Amazon system contains 1100 tributaries, of which seventeen are over 1000 miles long—longer than the Rhine (820 miles) and the St. Lawrence (800 miles) and almost as long as the Columbia (1243 miles). The largest of these tributaries is the Rio Negro. Its black waters are poured into the Amazon at a rate up to four times the volume of Mississippi River water emptied into the Gulf of Mexico.

Perhaps the most amazing fact about the Amazon is its shallow

gradient—only two inches per mile from Iquitos to the Atlantic, a distance of 2300 miles. Thus, unlike other rivers whose waters are pulled downstream by gravity, the Amazon is more pushed than pulled by the huge volume of water cascading down the Andes and accumulating at flood in the enormous reservoir of streams and swamps within the Amazon basin.

The Amazon is an ancient river. Hundreds of millions of years ago, before the super-continent of Gondwanaland was pulled apart by tectonic drift, the Amazon flowed from east to west. Geologists believe its source was located in the area of the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. As South America drifted westward it collided with the Pacific Ocean plate. The consequence was an upthrust that created the Andes, blocked the flow of the Amazon, and formed a giant freshwater lake. About 50 million years ago the entire continent of South America tilted to the east, thus creating the Amazon drainage system as it exists today.

It is the northern edge of this vast wilderness of water and rain forest that O'Hanlon sets as a point of entry. Strong bodies and river experience are needed. The crew will be organized in Caracas. The priority while still in England is to interest a compatible traveling companion from among O'Hanlon's friends and acquaintances. It is not easy. The poet James Fenton, who accompanied him to Borneo, turns him down flat. "I want you to know that I would not come with you to High Wycombe." O'Hanlon is dismayed. Several other prospects fail to understand his enthusiasm. Finally he talks to Simon Stockton, a friend from his twenties. Simon is deep into the casino lifestyle of London. He knows nothing about the lifestyle of the Amazon, but he agrees to go. "I need to change my life."

In Caracas O'Hanlon goes to the top to organize the expedition. Charles Brewer-Carias is the great explorer and photographer of Venezuela. He is also a popular hero because of his aggressive support of Venezuela's territorial claims against Guyana. Charlie sets the objective. O'Hanlon explains it to Simon.

We're going to try to be the first people to reach Neblina, the highest mountain in South America outside the Andes, via the vast Baria swamp. Then we'll be going down a river that nobody's been down since the seventeenth century, to try and find a fierce people called the Yonomami. Apparently they hit each other over the head in duels with ten-foot-long clubs and they hunt each other with six-foot-long arrows.

For the first time, Simon begins to comprehend what he has gotten into. "Oh thanks," said Simon, concentrating at last . . . "Out of sight. Thanks a bundle for telling me in London. I've always wanted to be slammed in the arse with an arrow and then whacked on the nut with a pole."

Charlie selects the crew: Chimo, who claims to know this route; Glavis, radio operator and cook; Valentine, an old prow-man; and Pablo, very strong

and good with an axe. Charlie pronounces the crew as the best in Venezuela. He also instructs O'Hanlon to hire two dugouts with outboard motors. "Two dugouts?" Redmond asked. "Redmond, you are going to one of the most isolated places on earth. If you break a boat, running it over tree trunks, you could never walk out of that swamp."

A charter plane flies south with O'Hanlon and Simon to the frontier town of San Carlos, where the party assembles and organizes for departure. From here the adventure begins. O'Hanlon's chronicle includes the challenges, the difficulties, the dangers and escapes, the bugs, the rain, the heat—all of the physical hardships and mental stress endured—the day-to-day routine of living off the land, but also the feelings of accomplishment and wondrous nature. The complex relationships of water, the forest, and its inhabitants are observed. Spectacular bird sightings, of which there are many, are noted. O'Hanlon describes an unforgettable meeting with a Harpy Eagle.

Juan woke me with a yell. I opened my eyes and focused them straight into the green-brown pupils of the mightiest eagle in the world. The black and white rounded wings, a good six feet across, seemed to hang above the boat forever; the grey hood and enormous hooked black bill were turned down toward us; the wrist-thick legs and the massive talons, a startling bright yellow, were held straight back towards the long barred tail.

"Jesus," I said.

A bird that lives by ripping monkeys and sloths out of trees, it plainly intended to amuse itself by plucking Juan and me out of the dugout, one in each foot. But then, thinking better of it, with one leisurely beat of the great wings, it rose over the canopy and out of sight.

The party is lost in the Baria swamp. O'Hanlon is intrepid, sometimes discouraged but never deterred, always pushing on. The comfort-loving, totally urbanized Simon despairs about going on. A remote army outpost offers escape. He quits.

"Don't do it," I said. "You'll feel bad about it later. About deserting me . . . you'll never forgive yourself."

"Oh yes I damn well will. I have already, Redmond—I've cried four times in my adult life. Once when my father died; once when my wife left me; once when Pinky my cat was run over in front of me; and every night when we were lost up in that stinking pitsville of a swamp."

The native crew is terrified as Yonamami territory is approached. They threaten to turn back. O'Hanlon doubles their wages and orders them on. With

great trepidation they visit a Yonamami village. They are received with suspicion and barely controlled hostility. They share the village yoppo pipe and experience a wild psychedelic night. With the help of a friendly Yonamami, they slip away through the forest and escape in their canoes.

With aplomb, earthy British humor, and an easy narrative style, O'Hanlon spins out his tale of adventure. In the process he provides a vicarious, "tell it like it is" education about life in the Amazon rain forest. The Amazon is one of the world's great wonders. Everyone who resonates with nature should have an Amazon experience. Start by reading this book.

ALDEN CLAYTON's Amazon experience was closer to "the comforts of civilization" than "the native way." He recalls the particular pleasure of drifting downstream in a canoe, on a day like New England summertime with blue sky and white fleecy clouds overhead, while watching wonderful birds fly across the river from giant tree to giant tree. Alden has contributed to *Bird Observer* from time to time in the past. He is currently department head for book reviews.

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