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Kinabalu: Summit of Borneo

(Plates 55–59)

Until this year, as a result of worldwide media attention, Mount Kinabalu was either largely unknown in the West or regarded as a fairly chunky but otherwise easy mountain of no particular interest to mountaineers. Few can now claim not to have heard of the mountain and, although their idea of Kinabalu has undoubtedly been modified by reportage often erring towards sensationalism, many are left not quite grasping what the mountain is really like.

Thinking back to my UK schooldays, neither geography nor history lessons had much, if anything, to say about Borneo. Except to know that it is the world's largest island, it remained something of an overlooked dark green spot on the world map that was far too backward and inconsequential to justify any study. It was only after a two-year spell in Uganda, during which the Ruwenzori mountains absorbed all my available leave, that wanderlust set me looking for jobs in the Far East. Hong Kong and Sabah seemed to be the only places requiring general practice surveyors in the mid-1970s. Hong Kong really didn't appeal (I have never been inspired to regard tall buildings as climbing challenges), but Sabah at least sounded different. First question: 'Are there any mountains there?' The answer was 'Well ... er ... yes, there is one mountain – but nothing very special.'

A check in the atlas showed Mount Kinabalu (pronounced Kinabaaloo) at 13,455ft – quite respectable really, considering it rises almost from sea-level. At not much less than either Mont Blanc or the Ruwenzori, it must surely offer some potential. So that settled the decision in favour of Sabah.

Tropical rain forest areas are not noted for their clear atmosphere and clouds generally gather after mid-morning. So one is very lucky to see the mountain when first arriving in Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah (formerly known as Jesselton and North Borneo respectively). The early mornings are usually clear, however, and the mountain can be seen presiding over the comings and goings of everyday life, somewhat aloof and distant but ever present. This sight touches the soul, especially at sunrise when silhouetted against the morning sky its presence appears closer. Sometimes the mountain is seen even in the afternoon with its personality changing hour by hour, so that it almost takes on a character of its own in the minds of West Coast residents.

The first person to write in English about Mount Kinabalu was Alexander Dalrymple in 1769. The Idaan to which he refers are the Dusun of today who live on the lower slopes around Mount Kinabalu. He wrote:

> The Idaan have very many whimsical religious tenets; paradise is generally supposed to be a top of Keeney-Balloo ... guarded by a fiery dog who is a formidable opponent to the female sex; for, whenever any virgins come, he seizes them as his legal prize; but whatever women have been cohabited with in this world he considers as unworthy of his embrace and lets them pass.[1]

In 1922 another writer, Owen Rutter, observed:

> Mount Kinabalu is undoubtedly the most striking physical feature of North Borneo ... a landmark from afar; it rises sheer and wonderful above a thousand hills ... it is no wonder that natives hold it in veneration as the resting place of departed spirits and a dragon's home.[2]

Of course until Europeans started climbing the mountain the Dusun, although living up to about 6000ft, would have regarded the mountain peak as hostile. Early climbers had difficulty recruiting guides and porters because none had explored the mountain and all were petrified of the mountain spirits. The accounts of the early ascents show that non-Dusun porters had to be used and the Dusun guide bribed handsomely. Even then, long stops were required for religious rites and the guide refused to go above the tree line. After one of the early ascents an epidemic of illness in the villages was interpreted as retribution by the spirits for disturbing their peace, and the villagers were exceedingly hostile to visitors wishing to climb the mountain. Even the Chinese traders, going back to the beginning of the Ming dynasty, held Mount Kinabalu in awe. In China the most extravagant legends were accepted and it is possible that some of these spilled back into local folklore. Even today, despite knowledge and familiarity casting the old notions aside, the mountain is held in wide reverence and awe and largely regarded as the heavenly residence for the spirit world.

So why all this fuss? Most of Borneo rises only to about 3000ft, except for the Crocker range which rises to about 6000ft and stretches down almost the entire length of Borneo a little inland from the west coast. This entire area is covered with jungle except where placed under cultivation. Within the jungle is a world dominated by green shade with hardly ever a vista. Mount Kinabalu, rising to 13,455ft, is a complete contrast and it was perhaps that very contrast which led American aeroplanes flying over Sabah in the Second World War to report: 'Say, that God-dammed thing cannot be 13,000. Why that's nothing. It must be near as high as Mount Everest. These Borneo maps are all to hell anyway.'[3] By the end of that year all American war maps of Borneo were overstamped 19,000ft!

55. Mt Kinabalu, 4101m, Malaysia. Steps on the standard trail to the summit. (*Robert New*) (p145)

Kinabalu, even more than Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro, positively forces itself on the conscience of its viewers. Moreover its open rock faces, distant panoramic views and occasional snow and ice contrast dramatically with the rest of Borneo, while unique flora and fauna provide excitement for scientists and fascination even for the casual visitor.

Kinabalu's special stature also arises from its unusual evolution. Although once regarded as a very ancient formation, it is now believed to be one of the youngest great mountains in the world. 'The whole structure has emerged, as granite through sandstone, in little more than a million years – mere child's play in geological time.' [4] This process is said to be still continuing at the rate of one fifth of an inch each year. The granite of Kinabalu is of course much harder than the sandstone of the Crocker range and accounts for the steep rock faces which surround the mountain and the numerous sharp peaks rising above the large summit plateau, which extends to about four square miles. Some of the flanks of the mountain form into ridges, the most prominent being to the south, east, north and north-west. Between the north and north-west ridges a deep cleft cuts into the mountain and its summit plateau, so dividing the plateau into two. The south ridge provides the easiest gradients and, because it also runs down to the Tenompok Pass over the Crocker range, this is the most accessible route on the mountain and provides today's standard summit trail.

The north and east slopes of the mountain fall to thick montane forest and primary jungle which extends for many miles before reaching villages and roads. Expeditions have had to choose between the easier terrain of the ridges, with no water, and the difficult terrain of the valleys with, if anything, too much water, and this side of the mountain remains a formidable challenge to expeditions.

Kinabalu was first climbed by Hugh Low in 1851. At that time, the journey to the base of the mountain from the coast was a much greater ordeal than climbing the mountain itself. Few today who leave their cars at 6500ft can possibly imagine what it was like to reach this point after walking for two weeks through the jungle. On his first expedition Low climbed to the col between Tunku Abdul Rahman Peak to the east and the Donkey's Ears to the west where there is a precipitous drop into the most impressive gully. This gully leads down into the main northwards cleft of the mountain, named after Low, while the impassive head of the gully into which Low looked is now called Commando Cauldron after a commando expedition which reconnoitred the area in December 1964. The col is now called Cauldron Gap. Low on finding a steep narrow ridge reported:

> On placing my breast against it and looking over the ridge, I gazed into a circular amphitheatre about 80 yards broad, the bottom of which from its great depth and my position overhanging it, was undiscernable, though I imagine I could see down two thousand feet.[5]

It is reported that after 'finishing an excellent bottle of madeira to Her Majesty's health' he left a note in the bottle and descended.[6] He reported being overtaken by 'Scotch mist' but possibly the excellent madeira contributed to that problem.

Ironically, although Low returned to climb the mountain twice in 1858, he never reached the summit and although his companion, Spencer St. John, climbed the peak immediately to the west of the summit to within 40ft, somehow the very much easier summit eluded him. From all available research, it appears that the first person to reach the true summit of Kinabalu was John Whitehead in 1888 on what is believed to have been the eleventh recorded expedition to climb the mountain.[7]

Other expeditions followed but during the first 100 years after Low made his inaugural climb in 1851 there were only 53 recorded visits made to the mountain. By modern standards, the early expeditions were amazing. The prize seems to go to Capt F C Learmouth who, accompanied by four others, and Wigson, a bull terrier that was probably the first and last dog to reach the summit, climbed the mountain in 1910 with over 100 porters. They certainly didn't stint on comfort and carried beds, mattresses, chairs, etc up the mountain. This expedition was in fact responsible for first establishing the height of the mountain at 13,455ft, and one of its members made a film of the expedition.[8]

Early expeditions also had to contend with elaborate religious ceremonies carried out by their guides and porters. There does not appear to have been any set pattern to these rites, and the number of chicken and other sacrifices that the expeditions were required to purchase seemed to grow year by year. Fortunately, with over 20,000 people climbing the mountain each year, these ceremonies have been dropped but the pay-off seems to be the Park requirement that all climbers hire Dusun guides who, for the pleasure of their company, charge RM40 per day (about £10).

There are now huts at four locations on the mountain. The lowest, known as Layang Layang Hut (formerly Carson's Camp), is positioned at about 8200ft and normally only takes a backpacking party about two hours to reach. This hut is strategically located on the lower border of the ultra basic rock zone so there is a significant change in the vegetation at this point. Accordingly, this hut is normally used only by scientists and park staff. The main base for climbers at the end of their first day's trek is at Panar Laban which is immediately below large rock slabs up which the summit route originally went. This base comprises two small aluminium huts at about 10,900ft and, more recently, the larger Gunting Lagadan Hut built almost adjoining. A little lower is the newest, Laban Rata Hut, at about 10,500ft, which boasts hot showers (if you are lucky) and a restaurant service.

The Panar Laban/Laban Rata huts accommodate about 150 people and despite the rarity of good sunrises most climbers make an early start to reach the summit at about 5.30am. The trail up to Panar Laban is an

almost unrelenting staircase through various types of montane forest. Above Panar Laban the terrain is more rocky and the vegetation is shrubby and starts thinning out. The first half mile is a series of wooden step-ladders which give way to a rocky trail leading to the top of the vegetation zone and the point where you climb on bare rock. From here the Park authority has secured fixed ropes all the way to the summit. On the steeper sections these are helpful but on much of the trail one simply walks along beside the rope which was placed after several people disappeared on the mountain without trace after missing the old cairns in bad weather.

At about 12,000ft one passes the Sayat-Sayat Hut which is a basic steel uniport shelter enjoying expansive views and a situation immediately below some of the summit pinnacles. This is a good base for climbing expeditions except for the fact that at about 4.30 every morning 150 people tramp by chattering away and wondering what the hut looks like inside. Dave Nichol, who wrote[9] about Kinabalu in the 1985 *AJ*, stayed here, but if you like late lie-ins, this is not for you.

The summit is in many ways the same anti-climax that so many summits offer today, with numerous mementoes left by proud climbers in the form of flags, inscribed plaques, notes in bottles and such-like, as well as film wrappers, sweet papers, tin cans, torn plastic macs, etc, etc. At sunrise you share the summit with 150 others, oblige a Japanese tour group by taking their photograph, blink at flash guns going off all around you and feel self-satisfied that you are amongst the few élite who have ever explored the other parts of this beautiful mountain. All this has inevitably given rise to the notion that Mount Kinabalu is an easy mountain. A notion which has caught some climbers off guard and has discouraged others from giving the mountain a second thought.

By half past six you are alone on the summit. The day's visitors are now racing down in a state of fulfilment, blissfully unaware that within an hour most of them will be suffering leg and knee pains the like of which they have never had before. Now you can enjoy the other, more real Mount Kinabalu: the magnificent rock peaks around you, the views over the entire north of Borneo and, for those used to living on the equator, the joy of a cool refreshing atmosphere. What you cannot fail to notice, however, is Low's Gully, the cleft that splits the mountain in two. You cannot see the bottom but you can see the steep rock sides dropping away unrelentingly into the invisible depths of the abyss – a sight that must have inspired every true climber who has ever climbed the mountain. From the summit, a short walk into the West Cwm area takes you to the West Gurkha Hut, a cosy little four-man hut encircled by granite peaks and pinnacles, except to the north-west where there is an expansive view to the coast. Built by the author in 1985 with the help of Gurkha soldiers stationed with the British garrison in Brunei at 12,600ft, this is a place where one can be at one with the mountain. It is the place for sunsets, meditation and as a base for climbing anywhere on the west plateau away from the crowds.

56. Low's Gully which falls over 900m from the summit plateau of Mt Kinabalu. (*Robert New*) (p150)

57. Young bracts at 12,500ft. Kinabalu Park protects and preserves the complete spread of plant life from lowland tropical forest to the limit of plant growth on the summit. (*Robert New*) (p145)

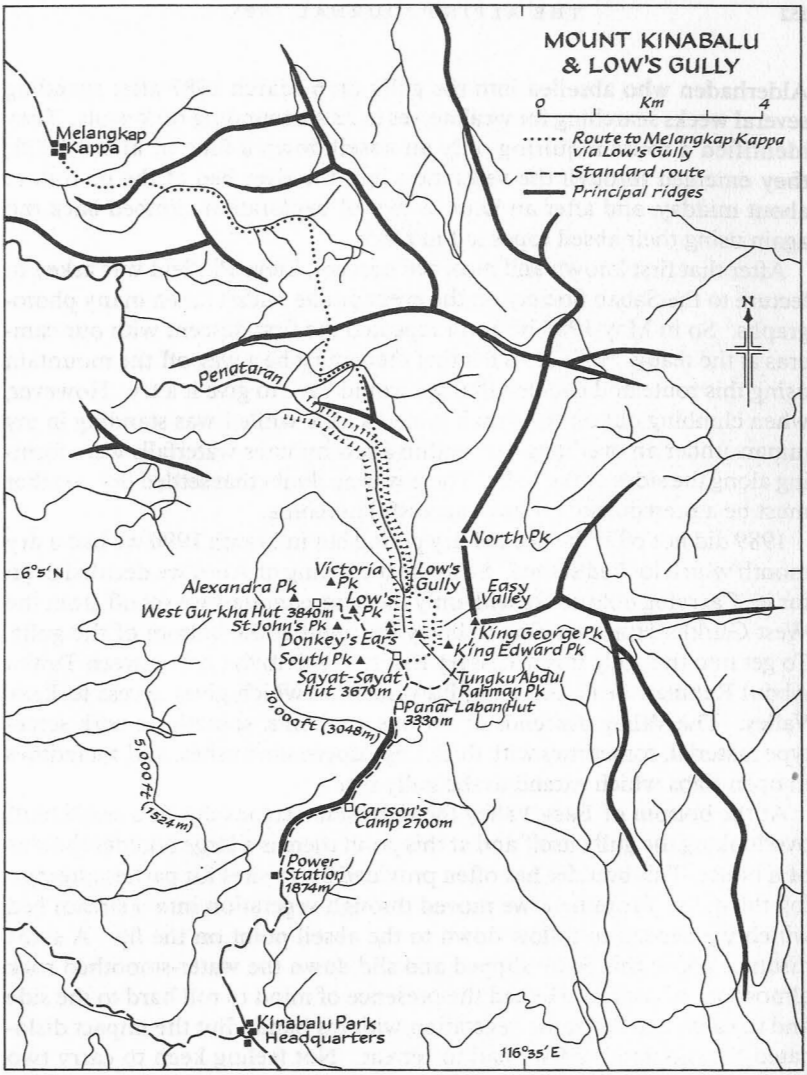
Some of the major peaks, of which there are about eleven, have easy ways up. Others, such as the Donkey's Ears, Dewali Pinnacles and King Edward Peak, require rock-climbing skills. But the Park authorities are always nervous about parties climbing any routes other than the standard trail. This nervousness arises because they have no mountain rescue service available, search and rescue being almost hopeless in jungle terrain. There is also the problem that international rings have been denuding some areas of the mountain of rare orchids and other plants.

To date, routes have been made down the full length of the East Ridge to Poring Hot Springs, up the NW flank by way of Marai Parai, up the Mesilau river to the East Plateau via the E ridge, up the Panataran river to North Peak and down Low's Gully to Kampung Melankap Kappa. There is also a route linking the East and West Plateaux. Unfortunately, relatively few climbing expeditions have left route descriptions behind and, of the 30 or so reports collected together so far, the actual descriptions are very poorly written and difficult to follow. When climbing, one comes across a lot of pitons and expansion bolts indicating earlier climbs, often by Japanese parties. Nonetheless, most of these have followed the easiest route to the top and there is an abundance of classic-looking lines still to be climbed. In particular, there is enormous scope to pioneer rock routes on the big faces that face into Low's Gully and on the steeper outer flanks of the mountain itself. With only a handful of people living in the area with more than a passing interest in rock climbing, new horizons in this aspect of the mountain will be very slow in emerging, especially so long as Mount Kinabalu suffers the 'only for tourists' tag.

The one event which may possibly change that is the unsuccessful and almost tragic British Army expedition which planned to make a first complete descent of Low's Gully. The attention given by the international press and television networks has now placed Mount Kinabalu within the knowledge of ordinary people throughout the world. With the writing of books and production of a film, this exposure will continue for a while yet. The bad aspect of all this is the sensationalism which has arisen in its wake. The good aspect is hopefully that some strong climbers will view Kinabalu as a mountain worthy of respect and deeper exploration.

Whatever routes may be completed in the future, Low's Gully must remain a special challenge. We all remember certain classic routes that we have done, such as routes along narrow arêtes in breathtaking positions. It is perhaps unusual to regard a gully as a classic route, but Low's Gully is such a major feature of Kinabalu that it must always tempt those in search of adventure. Indeed, the first article in the *AJ* about Kinabalu was an account of an expedition by Tony Smyth in 1958 which planned to ascend the mountain by way of the Panataran river and Low's Gully.[10]

For me, the most satisfying aspect of the route was the feeling of being totally engulfed by the mountain, the sheer majesty of the towering rock walls and the need to crick one's neck to view the high peaks. Nowhere else do you feel so vividly the full might of this magnificent mountain.



There are various claims regarding the first into Low's Gully. Added confusion arises because there is no precise definition of where the gully begins or ends. Some expeditions have even believed that Easy Valley, which gives access to the upper section of the gully, was the gully itself. We know that commandos abseiled into Commando Cauldron in 1964 and a report appeared in the *Alpine Journal* of a first ascent of 'the north face' which (since there *is* no north face) may be referring to climbs in the Commando Cauldron area.[11] Nonetheless, to most people standing on the summit it is the deeper gully below that which is Low's Gully proper. So far as can be ascertained, the first party to find a way into this lower section through the steep rock faces on either side was that of Pinfield, Brandi and

Alderhaden who abseiled into the gully on 6 March 1987 after spending several weeks searching for weaknesses in its surrounding rock walls. They identified a route requiring only an abseil down a face of about 300ft; they emerged through the vegetation into the river bed at the bottom at about midday, and after an hour or two of exploration climbed back out again using their abseil ropes left in place.

After that first known and recorded descent, Steve Pinfield was asked to lecture to the Sabah Society on the event but he hadn't taken many photographs. So in May 1988 he and I repeated the first descent with our cameras at the ready. Both of us felt that there must be a way off the mountain using this route and decided that we would have to give it a try. However, when climbing out on that trip it rained a little while I was standing in my jumars under an overhang and within a few minutes waterfalls were forming along the sides of the gully. There was no doubt that settled dry weather must be a prerequisite for any successful outcome.

1989 did not offer the needed dry period but in March 1990 we had a dry month which looked settled. So at the beginning of April we decided to go for it. Carrying 40lb packs with only the bare essentials we set off from the West Gurkha Hut intending to bivvy the night at the bottom of the gully. To get into the gully it is necessary first to climb to the col between Tunku Abdul Rahman Peak and King Edward Peak which gives access to Easy Valley. The Valley descends at various gradients, sometimes with scree-type material, sometimes with thick Leptospermum bushes, and sometimes in open slabs which extend to the gully rim.

At the bottom of Easy Valley the right side extends out to a small bluff overlooking the gully itself and at this point there is a large boulder the size of a house. This boulder has often provided bivvy sites for parties attempting the gully. From here we moved through vegetation into a stream bed which we needed to follow down to the abseil point on the lip. A short distance above this Steve slipped and slid down the water-smoothed rock almost out of control. He had the presence of mind to roll hard to the side and to catch hold of some vegetation with his hand. But the impact dislocated his shoulder and we had to retreat. Not feeling keen to carry two rucksacks all the way back up, I extracted all the climbing gear and left it under the house boulder ready for our next attempt.

In March the next year we again had a very dry spell and we decided to have another go. Getting into the gully was no great problem, although pulling our abseil ropes after us was a very committing moment. We slept that night on a rock in the middle of the river, at this time only a trickle. The next day we worked our way down the gully at a good pace, mostly jumping down from rock to rock but avoiding some big drops with detours through the dense vegetation to the side of the river bed. At one point we put in an abseil. It was clear that, while working your way down large river boulders on your bottom is fine for going down, the picture would be very different for anyone attempting to climb up.

58. Mt Kinabalu: Dewali Pinnacles at sunset seen from the West Gurkha Hut. (*Robert New*) (p150)

59. West Gurkha Hut, 3840m, and Dewali Pinnacles. (*Robert New*) (p149)

At about 4pm we arrived at a point where the gully narrowed to a gorge about 25ft wide with sheer rock walls to either side, big rounded boulders in the river bed and a waterfall tumbling about 20ft to a lake stretching from wall to wall. A similar waterfall and lake could be seen 150 yards further down. It was immediately clear that this would be another totally committing move. Descent of the waterfall would commit us to the gorge with no obvious way out except on down an unknown number of further waterfalls. We decided we needed the night to ponder on this problem and camped right there.

The following morning we looked again at the problem and decided that we had neither the gear to tackle a succession of waterfalls nor possibly enough food, as we had only bargained for six days. The only other choice being to climb out of the gully, our attention turned to the gully sides above us. To the south the wall appeared steeper and more sparsely vegetated and, furthermore, the north wall would give access to the next tributary and thence to Melangkap Kappa, our intended destination. So we started climbing this wall at what seemed a promising point, quickly becoming entangled in almost vertical thick vegetation. A ledge seemed hopeful but after 100 yards this petered out on the blank face above the waterfall.

So we abseiled back into the river bed and started again. This time we reversed up the gully about 150 yards before taking to the wall. The going was hard with thick vegetation, often loose and sometimes overhanging, intermingled with prickly rattan. Gradually, as we rose and traversed west, the gradient eased until we thought we had climbed far enough and should start descending in order to reach the next valley.

But the aim of the expedition was to follow the river so, to keep weight down, we did not take water bottles. Now we had left the river we were parched dry. The terrain was difficult enough but thirst had the effect of creating far more stress and anxiety than the physical difficulties alone. So after a rest to try and make some saliva we descended about 150ft until the ground steepened to a point where, to proceed further, it would have to be an abseil. We were now above a lower section of the gully and could see more lakes and larger waterfalls below us. The options were to drop back into the gully, traverse west and up, or go straight up. It proved a difficult and crucial decision and we debated it for 20 minutes. The decision finally was to go up. The long pull-up, often hanging onto overhanging roots, was gruelling and my spirits were very low. Steve was fitter and did a good job egging me on. After what seemed an eternity, we hit a sharp ridge and collapsed for a rest.

We thought we had better eat something, but with no saliva how do you swallow? As I moved my jaw it squeaked and Steve's laughter didn't help much. He then said he thought he could see a footpath running along the ridge, but I pooh-poohed it as a small game trail of which there are always many in the jungle. He released his rucksack, got up and looked around. Then came a trimphant exclamation because he found an old sweet paper.

The lift in our spirits was immediate and somehow our parched throats mattered no more. The path was well cut, certainly not a native trail. The terrain was amazingly steep for a path of this sort and we figured it must be a British Army trail put in when they attempted to climb to the East Plateau from Camp Paradise near Kota Belud. A tree carved with '1990' confirmed this. After about 1½ hours the path dropped onto a small platform beside a river – a perfect camping spot by an idyllic river – just as the sun was going down. The toughest day of the expedition had come to an end. From here we followed the river downstream and then followed hunting trails to Melangkap Kappa which we reached in a further day and a half.

It was this route that the British Army training expedition that went so wrong planned to complete. They figured that, with more manpower and more gear, they should be able to overcome the last one mile or mile and a half of the gully to meet the main Panataran river. Ironically, it was just this combination of a large team carrying overweight packs that sowed the seeds of discontent and resulted in first the expedition splitting into two and then the weaker party reaching the end of its resources.

Too much has probably already been written about this expedition and undoubtedly various books and films are going to add to the confusion before all is done. I do not intend to add more fuel to the fire as I think most experienced mountaineers can read between the lines and make up their own minds as to what went wrong. My principal concern has been the response of the Park Authority in terms of their attitudes towards future expeditions to the remoter parts of the mountain. For the time being, it appears that the dreaded embargo on such expeditions will not occur, but no longer can they expect to be given access to the mountain without prior vetting of their plans and credentials.

The record time set by a Gurkha soldier for running to the summit of Kinabalu and back to the roadhead is about 2 hours 20 minutes. It is all too easy, given this knowledge, to regard Kinabalu as a mere afternoon stroll and write it off as of no account. This denies the fact that this is a great mountain with many moods and huge potential for new rock routes of a high order.

This mountain will always charm those who live in its shadow, just as Tom Harrison was charmed when he wrote about Kinabalu thus:

> ... here it stands, seemingly unshakeable, a mighty mountain. One hour it is there, the next nowhere – lost in the cloud world. Then there it is, safely back again at the first streak of day: that wonder lost twelve hours before, as the wet cold night clamped down across the moss forest. It is back, that incredible backdrop of teeth and fangs, gulley, precipice, cliff, plateau, gorge, peak, projectile, point – you name it, Kinabalu has it, up there above you, black and tense, looking as if forged in iron and dropped into place as a vast casting. Surely this is the most complete statement of 'I am a Mountain' made anywhere on this earth.[12]

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Note: The Sabah Society Monograph entitled *Kinabalu Summit of Borneo*, published in 1978, is a comprehensive compendium of chapters covering all aspects of the mountain and is a particularly useful source of reference on natural history subjects. The first edition has long been out of print but a new, rewritten second edition, containing significant new material, is to be published during 1995.