PDF | Savage Harvest: A Tale of Cannibals, Colonialism, and Michael Rockefeller's Tragic Quest for Primitive Art

by Carl Hoffman
The mysterious disappearance of Michael Rockefeller in New Guinea in 1961 has kept the world and his powerful, influential family guessing for years. Now, Carl Hoffman uncovers startling new evidence that finally tells the full, astonishing story.

Despite exhaustive searches, no trace of Rockefeller was ever found. Soon after his disappearance, rumors surfaced that he’d been killed and ceremonially eaten by the local Asmat—a native tribe of warriors whose complex culture was built around sacred, reciprocal violence, head hunting, and ritual cannibalism. The Dutch government and the Rockefeller family denied the story, and Michael’s death was officially ruled a drowning. Yet doubts lingered. Sensational rumors and stories circulated, fueling speculation and intrigue for decades. The real story has long waited to be told—until now.

Retracing Rockefeller’s steps, award-winning journalist Carl Hoffman traveled to the jungles of New Guinea, immersing himself in a world of headhunters and cannibals, secret spirits and customs, and getting to know generations of Asmat. Through exhaustive archival research, he uncovered never-before-seen original documents and located witnesses willing to speak publically after fifty years.

In Savage Harvest he finally solves this decades-old mystery and illuminates a culture transformed by years of colonial rule, whose people continue to be shaped by ancient customs and lore. Combining history, art, colonialism, adventure, and ethnography, Savage Harvest is a mesmerizing whodunit, and a fascinating portrait of the clash between two civilizations that resulted in the death of one of America’s richest and most powerful scions.
An Amazon Best Book of the Month, March 2014: “I think I can make it.” In 1961, while on an expedition to collect pieces for his father’s Museum of Primitive Art, Michael Rockefeller and his traveling companion were plunged into the warm waters off New Guinea. The billionaire scion tied two empty gas cans to his body for floatation and swam for shore, and by most accounts, he made it. But what happened there, when he encountered members of the Asmat tribe—a culture marked by ritual violence and cannibalism—has been long debated. Did he disappear into the tropical jungles, or was he rendered and eaten by the tribesmen, as many speculated and the Rockefeller family long denied? Award-winning journalist Carl Hoffman has stepped into Rockefeller’s boot prints and Asmat society, interviewing generations of warriors in an exhaustive and engrossing attempt to solve the mystery. The result, Savage Harvest, succeeds not only as a captivating and sensational puzzle, but also as a (seemingly unlikely) modern adventure and a fascinating glimpse of an anachronistic people pulled into the 20th century by the tensions of global politics. So, did he make it? The title might offer a clue. --Jon Foro

Simon Winchester Reviews Savage Harvest: A Tale of Cannibals, Colonialism, and Michael Rockefeller’s Tragic Quest for Primitive Art

Carl Hoffman, who with his 2010 book The Lunatic Express demonstrated himself to be a traveler of the greatest courage and determination, as well as a writer of skill, has now made a significant contribution to history. Savage Harvest, a narrative that is as exciting as it is instructive, appears finally to have winnowed the truth from the mare’s nest of legend and wishful thinking surrounding the disappearance in November 1961, of Michael Rockefeller, in a remote region of southwestern New Guinea. The 23-year old, along with a Dutch anthropologist colleague and two young guides, were sailing in a dugout catamaran some three miles from the coast of Asmat. The craft overturned; the two locals swam for help, but as the wreck drifted farther from land an impatient Rockefeller decided to try and make it alone. With two fuel cans to help his buoyancy on what he reckoned would be a twenty-hour swim, he slid into the warm shallows of the Arafura Sea – never to be seen by friends or family again. Did he drown? Was he eaten by a shark? Did he vanish into the jungle, Kurtz-like? Or was he the victim of cannibalism at the hands of coastal villagers? Hoffman has shown that with assiduous tradecraft, hard work and near-obsessive tenacity, it is possible to know, to solve the supposedly insoluble. He has journeyed, twice now, deep into the dark interiors of Asmat, and has conducted interviews and learned the language and listened to sensible men and women – in New Guinea, in the Netherlands, in the anthropology departments of knowledgeable universities. And he has used a severe intelligence to determine just what happened on that warm dawn Monday, November 20, 1961. The Rockefellers – not least Michael’s twin sister Mary, who produced her own book two years ago – may not want to believe this tale; and the family did nothing to help Hoffman in his admirable quest. But the truth, as this book chronicles in patient, meticulous detail, has a way of eking itself out. Savage Harvest is a remarkable testament to the revealed truth, and of
its revealing - even if that truth is wholly bizarre and, to most, quite literally unpalatable.

Simon Winchester is the acclaimed author most recently of The Men Who United the States as well as Atlantic, The Professor and the Madman, The Man Who Loved China, A Crack in the Edge of the World, and Krakatoa, all of which were New York Times bestsellers. In 2006 Mr. Winchester was made an officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by Her Majesty the Queen. He resides in western Massachusetts.

Product Description

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