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Venture To The Interior



Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Just after World War II, Van der Post was sent by the British government to explore and report on two little known and little inhabited regions of British Nyasaland (later Malawi). These two areas are highlands and mountainous, rather atypical of Africa. With the help of colonial officers and numerous African guides and porters he completed the assignment, filed his report and later wrote this short book. "Venture to the Interior" is a thoughtful, philosophical, and introspective account of the expedition. Van der Post very much writes in the style of travel writers like Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux; the reader sees as much of a mental landscape (Van der Post's) as a geographical one. He describes the journey, both the physical and the mental, in prose that is honest and clear. His thoughts on Africa are usually interesting and often profound. The people he encounters and writes about are mostly Europeans: the district officer, the businessman, the settler-farmer. It would have been nice had he written more about the African population. Still, overall, this is a book well worth reading for those interested in Africa, exploration, travel writing. Most of Van der Post's other books are also well written and well worth reading.

This is one of van der Post's earliest books written in 1952 about his post WWII journey by "aeroplane" across Africa and to Nyasaland (Malawi) to survey the highlands of Mt. Mlanje and the Nyika Plateau for the colonial British government. Anyone that has read Laurens van der Post knows that he is a master of description both of the land and the people he encounters. I had wanted to read this book for years. It was very highly recommended to me by a fellow Peace Corps volunteer while I was in Botswana in southern Africa. After many years I found this one and finally read it and had a very difficult time putting it down to attend to the other demands of life. It is a very good, engaging book. As you read this you will have to look beyond the colonial perspective that van der

Post had regarding the British and the Malawian "natives" and see the riches of the country and it's people of that period. van der Post reflects often on the people and his recent return from his ordeal as a prisoner of war.

Thanks to the Vine Program I recently read Paul Theroux's latest work, *The Last Train to Zona Verde: My Ultimate African Safari*. My review is posted; one of my criticisms was the seemingly petty way that he attacked a number of other writers, including this work's author. Theroux called van der Post a "mythomaniac," a "fantasist" and "fake mystic." Theroux specifically mentioned this work, which I had first read some 40 years ago, and I was impressed with it then. Gulp! Had I been taken in again, thinking about *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Journey to Change the World... One Child at a Time (Young Reader's Edition)* by Greg Mortenson, and *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* by Steve Ambrose, both of which I enjoyed when I first read them, and then was sadly disappointed to find out the authors fabricated portions of their works? I checked Wikipedia, and there seems to be some substance to Theroux's charge; there is even a book that chronicles his deceptions: (*Storyteller: The Lives of Laurens van der Post*). So, I decided to re-read the book, in part to determine if I had not been critical enough the first time, as I had not in the books cited above. For me it remains a fascinating time, and a journey I much envy. Britain had emerged on the victorious side in World War II, but was still recovering. The political leadership realized that the colonial era was drawing to a close. They had already recognized Indian independence. Yet one strain of the leadership remained deeply attached to the fate of the world beyond its shores. The British "Locust Control Board" funded Wilfred Thesiger's trip across the Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia, in 1947, in part, to determine if that was the origins of the locust when they swept across India. Concern over food production, and the increasing world population led them to fund Laurens van der Post's journey to two remote highland areas of Nyasaland, (present day Malawi) which had been part of a federation with Rhodesia. (Ironically, in light of the '82 war, he mentioned that food concerns occurred due to "problems with Argentina.") He departed Heath Row (so spelt, with the space) on May 10, 1949, on an old-fashioned air journey, on a plane bound for South Africa, but with lengthy ground stops, to re-fuel, and feed the passengers, on the ground. The plane sat 24, in comfort. The plane had landing stops near Tripoli, Libya, Khartoum, in the Sudan, and then Nairobi, Kenya. He then commences on an even smaller plane to Blantyre, in Nyasaland. The first third of the book is devoted simply this air journey. He also gives a brief account of his ancestors, all of whom are of Dutch origins, who had immigrated to South Africa, thence being known as "Afrikaners." On one of

their treks in the 19th Century, to the "Free State," his grandmother, who was a small child at the time, narrowly escaped with her life, in a massacre by the natives, of the trekkers, that killed all the other members of the party, including her parents. He describes a "sleepy" Nyasaland, with no real anti-colonial movement, ruled by 2000 British whites (and that figure includes the wives!). The "sweet-spot" in the book is his description of his trek on Mt. Mlanje, in the extreme south of the country, in an area that bordered Portuguese East Africa (now, Mozambique.). It is a highland area, 2000-3000 meters, which looked, in many ways, like Scotland. The British actually had a forestry service there, and van der Post is repeatedly warned that they are deeply devoted to the cedar trees which grew on the mountain. Val and Dicky Vance, in their late 20's, with their young daughter, live an isolated and idyllic life high on the mountain. Their concern is that van der Post is on a mission to take their small place in "paradise" away from them. And in an unintentional way, he did: on their trek over the top of the mountain, Dicky Vance was swept away, and killed, while trying to cross a stream. Van der Post had to return with the grim news for his wife. The last third of the book was not as dramatic, and described his journey along the high Nyika plateau, in the far north of the country. In terms of the "re-evaluation," I still found the description of the journey fascinating. I was uneasy with his account of Dicky Vance's death; first of all, there were the endless "premonitions" which seemed to be constructed with hindsight. Likewise, his need to fault Dicky Vance for his death seemed to indicate that van der Post was hiding some inner guilt. And it should be noted that van der Post was a friend and an adherent of the philosophy of Carl Jung, and he weaves his outlook towards the African native from that perspective. At time, he seems to have progressive views, for example, his willingness to shake their hand, when others would not (OK... so, in a relative sense), but he also repeatedly uses the term "bearers," as indeed they were. Perhaps, that is merely "quaint", as is the use of some terms by Faulkner. Finally, he never says what the result of his two treks in the highlands was. Did he even file a report? So, with moments of unease about the veracity of certain points, I'll give it 4-stars.

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I used to live in East Africa and so was interested to see what it was like in 1952. Van der Post includes a lot of philosophizing in with the exploration, which I would have preferred less of. Malawi is a country that is not heard about a lot. I didn't know it had high mountains and I since went on the internet to see where he was and it is still the same. On the whole I found it very interesting and I learned quite a bit about the old British colonial system from it

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