

The Last Island: Discovery, Defiance, and the Most Elusive Tribe on Earth

Adam Goodheart

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Adam Goodheart's book *The Last Island* collects compelling and tragic anecdotes about various failed efforts, from the Victorian age to the present, to encounter and establish permanent contact with perhaps the last self-isolated people on Earth—the small tribe on North Sentinel Island, which belongs to the Andaman archipelago in the eastern Indian Ocean.

In the 1990s, a journalism assignment brought Goodheart in contact with the nearby, reclusive Jarawa tribe and near North Sentinel Island's shore, which set off his lifelong obsession with understanding North Sentinel Island's people and why they have been persistent (and somewhat successful) in resisting the outside world. Goodheart retraces contacts both accidental (shipwrecks) and deliberate (expeditions, government initiatives) with the tribe, including his own stealthy predawn boat ride to the island. Most encounters were brief; many were deadly for one or both parties. There are stories of kidnappings, murders, infectious diseases, and unsuccessful efforts to introduce the islanders to Western culture.

Goodheart's research took him to archives in Calcutta and London. His accounts are accompanied by a series of stunning black-and-white portraits of the islanders taken in the late 1800s; these have a timeless, haunting quality.

There is more awe than adventure in the book's meandering vignettes, and more searching for answers than discovery. Artful metaphors combine with the deft use of seafaring language to propel the narrative. But curiosity lingers. Why, as recently as 2018, would the tribe kill someone coming ashore waving a proverbial white flag (this time a young, zealous would-be Christian missionary from America, John Chau)?

Ultimately, while *The Last Island* does not provide such answers, it's a worthy addition to adventure and survival narratives—a satisfying effort to dispel some of the mystery shrouding the last earthly outpost of inhabitants who still live outside of time as many know it.

BRIAN D. HENDERSON (September / October 2023)

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