



# The Lost Tribe of Coney Island: Headhunters, Luna Park, and the Man Who Pulled Off the Spectacle of the Century

By Claire Prentice

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***The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* is an Amazon Best Book of the Month  
October 2014**

***The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* is a *New York Post* “must read”! October 2014**

Coney Island, summer 1905: a new attraction opened at Luna Park. Within weeks it would be the talk of the nation.

For the first time, *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* unearths the incredible true story of the Igorrotes, a group of “headhunting, dog eating” tribespeople brought to America from the Philippines by the opportunistic showman Truman K. Hunt. At Luna Park, the g-string-clad Filipinos performed native dances and rituals before a wide-eyed public in a mocked-up tribal village. Millions of Americans flocked to see the tribespeople slaughter live dogs for their daily canine feasts and to hear thrilling tales of headhunting. The Igorrotes became a national sensation—they were written up in newspaper headlines, portrayed in cartoons, and even featured in advertising jingles, all fueled by Truman’s brilliant publicity stunts.

By the end of the summer season, the Igorrote show had made Truman a rich man. But his genius had a dark side and soon he would be on the run across America with the tribe in tow, pursued by ex-wives, creditors, Pinkerton detectives, and the tireless agents of American justice.

Award-winning journalist Claire Prentice brings this forgotten chapter in American history to life with vivid prose and rich historical detail. The book boasts a colorful cast of characters, including the mercurial Truman Hunt; his ambitious, young Filipino interpreter, Julio Balinag; Fomoaley Ponci, the tribe’s loquacious, self-important leader; Luna Park impresarios Fred Thompson and Elmer “Skip” Dundy; and Frederick Barker, the government man dead set on bringing Truman to justice.

At its heart, *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* is a tale of what happens when two cultures collide in the pursuit of money, adventure, and the American Dream. It is a story that makes us question who is civilized and who is savage.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

“Claire Prentice has produced a well-researched and engrossing account of the Igorrotes...” —*The New York Times*

“Author Prentice ferreted this true tale from a variety of sources, and the pages of this incredible story are peppered with maps, period memorabilia (such as telegraphs and newspaper headlines), and weathered but fascinating photos of the Igorrotes themselves...This story of an astonishing spectacle is enhanced by Prentice’s sparkling prose.” —*Booklist*

“Prentice presents the story of the innocent tribe with sympathy; in her telling, the Igorrotes charm and entertain us once again after more than a century. The edifying, colorful adventures of headhunters captured in America by a sideshow rascal.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“...a riveting tale of the American dream gone wrong... Without scholarly pretensions, Prentice has crafted an entertaining popular account likely to appeal to fans of true crime and social history.” —*Library Journal*

“*The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* is at once an engrossing portrait of the Igorrote people and a fascinating meditation on the dark side of the American Dream. Claire Prentice has a reporter’s nose for a good story, and a novelist’s flair for telling it.” —Karen Abbott, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Liar, Temptress, Soldier, Spy*

“One of those books that is totally unexpected, and delightfully so. An astonishing story, beautifully and compassionately told.” —Alexander McCall Smith, author of *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*

“In her rich and absorbing account, Claire Prentice shines a bright light on the ‘primitive’ Igorrotes’ arrival in New York, and one opportunistic man’s quest to profit from a Western obsession with ethnological entertainment. Historically meticulous, *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* provides a fascinating glimpse into the heart and soul of America at the turn of the 20th century.” —Gilbert King, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Devil in the Grove*

“Combining exhaustive historical research with rich novelistic color, *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* thrillingly conjures up two long-vanished and equally exotic worlds. One is that of the ‘savage’ Igorrotes, a tribe of Philippine aborigines known as ‘a peaceful, good-humored, honest, industrious, and likable people,’ apart from their inveterate habit of ‘cutting off the heads of neighboring villagers.’ The other is turn-of-the-century Coney Island, a tawdry, titillating wonderland where respectable city folk flocked to ogle the ‘primitive,’ half-naked residents of the park’s ‘human zoo.’ At the juncture of both looms the larger-than-life figure of Truman Hunt, a quintessentially American huckster in the brazen mold of P.T Barnum. Like visitors to the old Luna Park, readers of Claire Prentice’s page-turning book can expect to be amazed, delighted, and edified.” —Harold Schechter, author of *The Mad Sculptor: The Maniac, the Model, and the Murder that Shook the Nation*

“*The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* is the fascinating, true-life, more-amazing-than-fiction story of a group of Philippine tribespeople, brought from the Stone Age to the wonders of Coney Island in 1905. Absolutely enthralling.” —Kevin Baker, author of *Dreamland* and *The Big Crowd*

“In the annals of exploiting humanity as entertainment, not even Barnum or Ripley can compare to the audacity of Truman Hunt and his eager band of Philippine tribespeople who titillated American audiences in the shadow of Manhattan. Kudos to Clair Prentice for uncovering this overlooked bit of history and bringing it to life as a thoughtful page turner. Packed with a ridiculously robust cast of lively characters, *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* manages to explore imperialism, sensationalism, greed, fame, and deceit, deftly capping it all off with a manhunt. Obsessively researched and written with vigor and compassion, the story of America’s taste for the exotic and elicit raises uneasy questions about who’s civilized and who’s savage.” —Neal Thompson, author of *A Curious Man: The Strange & Brilliant Life of Robert ‘Believe It or Not’ Ripley*

“*The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* is a social history and tale of adventure, culture clash, and the American dream.” —*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*

“Prentice stuns with her ability to make the readers feel as if they’re right there in the middle of the action. It’s a magnificent book about a terrible time...[but] most of all, the brilliant *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island* stands as testament to the sad saga and noble fortitude of its displaced, titular tribe.” —*Philippine Daily Inquirer*

## About the Author

Claire Prentice is an award-winning journalist whose work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *London Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, BBC Online, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Marie Claire*.

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## Introduction

Sitting on my desk is a tattered black and white photograph of a group of tribesmen, women and children, naked but for their g-strings. They are squatting on their haunches around a camp fire. Several of them look directly into the camera. One points, another laughs and holds up a stone, as if pretending he is about to throw it at the photographer. Some of them are smiling, apparently sharing a private joke. In the background, a young boy and girl are making something out of bits of broken wood. Behind a low fence, a group of men in formal American clothes and derby hats stand watching them. If you look closely, you can see a few of them are laughing too. If it wasn’t for the observers in Western clothes, it could be a scene taken from an ethnographic journal. But this is no documentary image of a distant people unaccustomed to contact with the rest of the world: this tribe is very aware we are watching, and they seem frankly amused by it.

When I first came across this photograph, I knew nothing about it, but the energy of the tribespeople drew me in. I immediately knew I had to find out who these people were. Where and when was the picture taken? What became of them?

My quest to unravel the story of the tribespeople in the picture has taken over several years of my life. It has been an addictive, fascinating, sometimes frustrating, but always fulfilling journey.

Now I know that the picture is one of a handful of photographic relics of an extraordinary episode in American history. It was taken more than a century ago at Coney Island, just a few miles from Downtown Manhattan.

The tribespeople are Bontoc Igorrotes, who became known in America simply as Igorrotes,<sup>1</sup> meaning ‘mountain people.’ Fifty of them were brought from their remote home in the mountains of the Northern Philippines to America and put on show at Luna Park in 1905. They were billed as “dog eating, head hunting savages” and “the most primitive people in the world.” The tribespeople became the sensation of the summer season and were soon in demand all over the US.

Millions of Americans flocked to see the Igorrotes. The crowds were captivated by the tribe's vitality, and thrilled and scandalized in equal measure by their near nudity, their dog feasts and their tattooed bodies which, the public learned, indicated their prowess as hunters of human heads.

As I study the Igorrotes' faces in the picture on my desk, I have often wondered what it was that persuaded them to leave their homes to set up camp in America's most famous amusement park. What did they think of America and Americans? How did they find life under the gaze of an audience? What was it like for the freedom-loving tribe to be locked up day and night at Luna Park? Did they regret their decision? What did they tell their families about their adventure when they returned home?

It is impossible to imagine what it was like for these pre-modern people to be thrust into the heart of the quintessential modern metropolis, New York.

This story is set at a time when disagreements about the political future of the Philippines had created a schism in American domestic politics. America had won the Philippines from Spain at the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898. But, far from being welcomed with open arms by the Philippine people, the U.S. had seventy thousands soldiers fighting in the islands to try to quash a rebellion of Filipino nationalists led by Emilio Aguinaldo. America won but was widely criticized for using excessive force and brutality to overcome the opposition to her rule.

The assumption of American control over the overseas territory prompted deep soul searching at home. Was it right for America to acquire an overseas empire? When, if ever, would the Filipinos be ready to take over the responsibility of governing themselves?

The Philippine issue was the determining foreign policy concern of the day, and the thread which connected the three presidencies of the early 20th century. William McKinley led the U.S. into the war with Spain and won the Islands. Theodore Roosevelt, who assumed the presidency in 1901 after McKinley's assassination, had unsuccessfully coveted the job of Governor General of the Philippines above any other political office, and dreamed of guiding the people of the islands towards self government, while William Howard Taft, Roosevelt's successor as President, had previously served as Governor General of the Islands.

The Philippine Islands were not just a concern for the upper echelons of the American Government. Later in life, back in the US, many of the men who had served in the Philippines saw their service there as a bond: time and time again in this story we encounter men and women who worked in the islands, as government servants, policemen, lawyers, doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, preachers, soldiers and politicians.

As America was taking control of the Islands, she was also sizing up her new subjects. Ethnologists were sent into far corners of the country to assess and report on the country's many indigenous tribes. The Islands' people were then categorized according to their level of 'civilization,' from barbaric to semi-barbarous to those deemed cultured and educated.

The earliest American visitors to the Philippines were particularly taken with the 'savage' Bontoc Igorrotes. In his major study 'The Bontoc Igorot,'<sup>2</sup> compiled in 1903, the American ethnologist Albert Ernest Jenks observed that, aside from cutting off the heads of neighboring villagers, the Bontoc Igorrotes were a peaceful, good natured, honest, industrious, and likeable people with low rates of crime. Jenks noted that they were true primitives who had no words for many items in modern culture, including shoes, pantaloons, umbrellas, chairs or books.

In 1904, the American Government spent \$1.5 million taking thirteen hundred Filipinos from a dozen different tribes to the St. Louis Exposition. The Philippine Reservation became one of the most popular features of the Fair, and the Igorrotes drew the largest crowds of all. By displaying the tribespeople in this manner, the U.S. Government hoped to gain popular support for its occupation of the Philippines by showing the American public that the Filipinos were innocents, a people far from ready for self-government, who were in need of paternalistic American protection.

From the first time the Filipinos arrived on American soil they were subject to endless newspaper articles which drew comparisons between their culture and that of their American hosts. Many articles focussed on their disdain for Western clothes and what was portrayed as their insatiable appetite for that most domesticated of American pets, the dog. But the Igorrotes were also invoked in articles about pre-marital

sexual relations, hard work, the simple life versus the complexities of modern living. Their trusting and trustworthy nature often drew comment.

During the Igorrotes' first visit to America for the 1904 St Louis World's Fair, the Macon Telegraph provided its readers with an insight into the Filipinos: "The Igorrote is more honest and more atronizi than the American. Knowing the value of money, he would not be tempted for one single instant to take that which did not belong to him, even if he were sure that his theft would never be found out. The property of another is absolutely safe in his possession." [Macon Telegraph, September 11, 1904]

The Igorrotes were like a mirror which was held up to American society. America might be the more "advanced" culture but whilst it took pleasure in atronizing at the primitive tribe, it was not entirely immune to the idea that it might learn something from it.

Displaying human beings for the entertainment and edification of the paying public seems shocking today but "human zoos" were nothing new in the early 1900s. For more than 400 years, exotic humans from faraway territories had been paraded in front of Royal Courts and wealthy patrons from Europe to Japan, and more recently at world's fairs and expositions as far afield as New York, Paris and London. But what happened in Coney Island in 1905 was the result of two modern forces meshing: American imperialism and a popular taste for sensationalism. The Igorrotes who were brought from the Philippines became caught up in the debate about America's presence in South-East Asia. They were used to push the case that America had a duty to protect, educate, and civilize such I and savage beings and, later when the treatment they experienced became a national scandal, they were used to argue that America had no place in the Philippines at all.

The other force was equally irresistible. Early 20th Century America was addicted to novelty and sensation. The human zoo which came from the Philippines and unpacked its bags at Coney Island in 1905 became the most talked-about show in town. The tribespeople were gawped at by everyone from ordinary members of the public who were willing to pay a quarter for the privilege of seeing human beings in the raw, to anthropologists, politicians, celebrities and even the daughter of the President. But there was another ingredient in this potent mixture, a volatile one which propelled the Igorrotes onto the front pages.

Sitting next to the picture of the Igorrotes on my desk is another photograph, faded and torn on one side. In it, a man in a panama hat and an expensive looking three-piece suit stands with a fat cigar in his hand, smiling for the camera. He is surrounded by a group of bare-chested Filipino tribesmen. He is Dr. Truman Knight Hunt, a former medical doctor who met the Igorrotes after he went to the Philippines following the outbreak of the 1898 Spanish-American War. It was Truman's idea to take the Igorrotes to Coney Island. There he transformed himself into one of the great publicists of his age, spinning a colorful web of stories about "his" tribe that the press and public lapped up.

No one could have predicted what would happen next.

## Users Review

### From reader reviews:

#### Eric Johnson:

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**Laura Hargis:**

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**Chris Robins:**

This book untitled The Lost Tribe of Coney Island: Headhunters, Luna Park, and the Man Who Pulled Off the Spectacle of the Century to be one of several books that best seller in this year, that's because when you read this guide you can get a lot of benefit in it. You will easily to buy this particular book in the book retailer or you can order it via online. The publisher with this book sells the e-book too. It makes you easier to read this book, because you can read this book in your Smartphone. So there is no reason to your account to past this reserve from your list.

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