



**The Making of
a Legend**



**Colonel Fawcett
in Bolivia**

Rob Hawke

**THE MAKING OF
A LEGEND:**

COLONEL FAWCETT IN BOLIVIA

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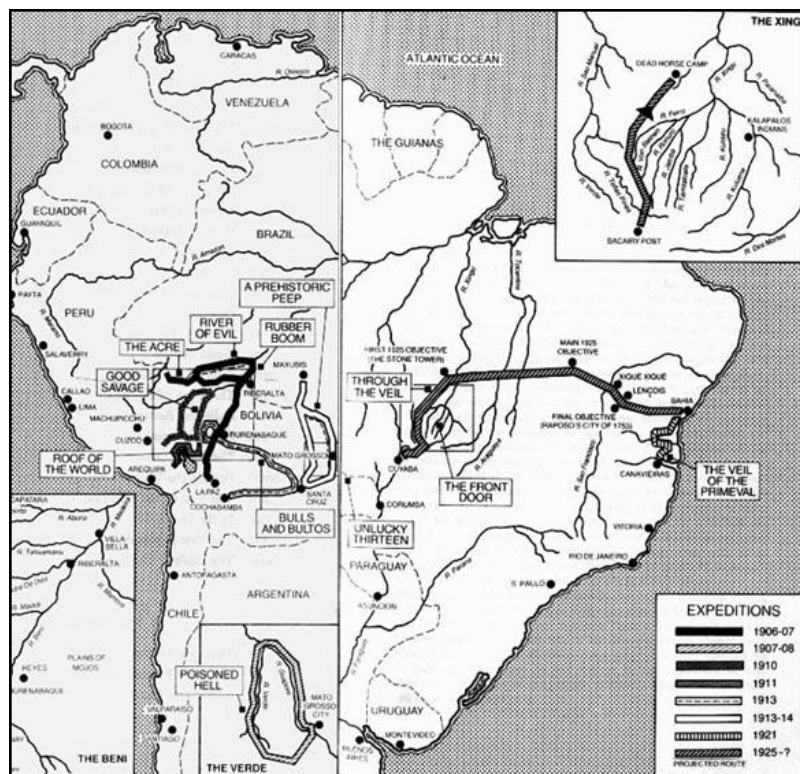
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“The jungle... it knows the secret of our fate. It makes no sign.”

HM.Tomlinson, *The Sea and the Jungle*



The original map for Exploration Fawcett, edited by Brian Fawcett

Introduction

When the English Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett failed to return from his 1925 expedition into the unexplored forests of the Brazilian interior, he vanished into the realm of legend. Fawcett was looking to make contact with a lost civilisation of highly advanced American Indians. The uncertainty of his fate, even 77 years on, has led to a number of hypotheses, some fantastical, some mundane, yet all shrouded in mystery. It is therefore not the purpose of this study to speculate upon his fate.

The body of work on Fawcett is wafer thin in comparison to other explorers who became heroic through dying, such as Scott and Franklin, though his story is hardly less remarkable. Subsequent writing about Fawcett has naturally tended to focus on his disappearance, with little attention paid to his long and distinguished career as an explorer in Bolivia, which will provide the main focus of this study. One cannot truly appreciate the climax of the Fawcett tragedy without an understanding of his long love affair with the South American continent. Behind the legend lies a very earthy and intriguing figure.

This study will concentrate on Fawcett in Bolivia from 1906 to 1914. It will attempt to provide an historical context to his writings and to shed new light on his activities in Bolivia, where he witnessed the burgeoning exploitation of its fertile lands, and competition between European powers to secure colonies and commercial prosperity. Through analysis of Fawcett's extraordinary memoirs¹ and correspondence, it will also investigate what clues we can ascertain from his Bolivian experiences that led to his change of intensity and subsequent obsession with lost cities. The final part will examine contemporary interest in the explorer.

¹ *Exploration Fawcett*, Lt. Col PH Fawcett, The Companions Book Club, London 1954 – arranged and compiled by his son Brian. BRACKETED PAGE REFERENCES CITED IN THE TEXT ARE FROM THIS EDITION.

PART ONE 1867 - 1914

1

EARLY LIFE

Physically captivating, it was hard to miss the domineering frame of Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett. The few surviving portraits reveal a tall athletic man with a stern hawkish face and steely eyes burning with intensity. That he was physically fit is an understatement. He began his last expedition, a gruelling hike through jungle without porters or pack animals, aged 58.

Born in Torquay, Devon, on 31st August 1867, Fawcett recalled a childhood “so devoid of parental affection that it turned me in upon myself”[33]. A tough public school upbringing at Newton Abbot, led to Fawcett graduating into the Royal Artillery. At the age of 19, he was stationed in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka. Here he developed an interest in Buddhism and the occult, spending his free time searching for the ‘hidden treasure’ of the Kandyan Kings.² He also met his future wife, Nina, a judge’s daughter. Although he appreciated the opportunity to learn skills such as gunnery and surveying, Fawcett considered army life as a means to an end. He spent the next decade drifting between posts in England, Malta, North Africa –where he undertook secret service work - Hong Kong, and once again, Sri Lanka. It was here in 1903 that Jack, his first son was born, after two years of marriage.

Fawcett reveals that although married life helped him shed much of his adolescent reserve, he remained a solitary figure, blazing his own trail through life rather than taking the conventional path. He was “by nature a lone wolf and rather abstemious”[33], with apparently exceptional self-control. He neither drank nor smoked. His memoirs reveal a man almost superhumanly talented, a boys-own all rounder. A decorated soldier, Fawcett’s fearless determination and pride, added to a quick, proactive mind, marked him down as a natural leader. At the same time he was a loving family man, open minded and forward thinking, talented in pen drawing and writing. He was also a keen sportsman, excelling at cricket and yachting.

² Fleming, Peter, *Brazilian Adventure*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York 1934. p20.

2**PATHWAY TO ADVENTURE**

In the spring of 1906, Fawcett was invited to a meeting with the President of the Royal Geographical Society, Sir George Taubman Goldie. The President explained that the RGS had been asked by the Bolivian Government to referee a dispute surrounding the location of her northern borders with Brazil and Peru. Fawcett, noted for his exceptional ability and experience in surveying, was the natural choice. It was a ticket away from the stifling monotony of army life, and he agreed enthusiastically, confessing “the mystery of its vast unexplored wilds, made the lure of South America irresistible to me. Destiny intended me to go”[38].

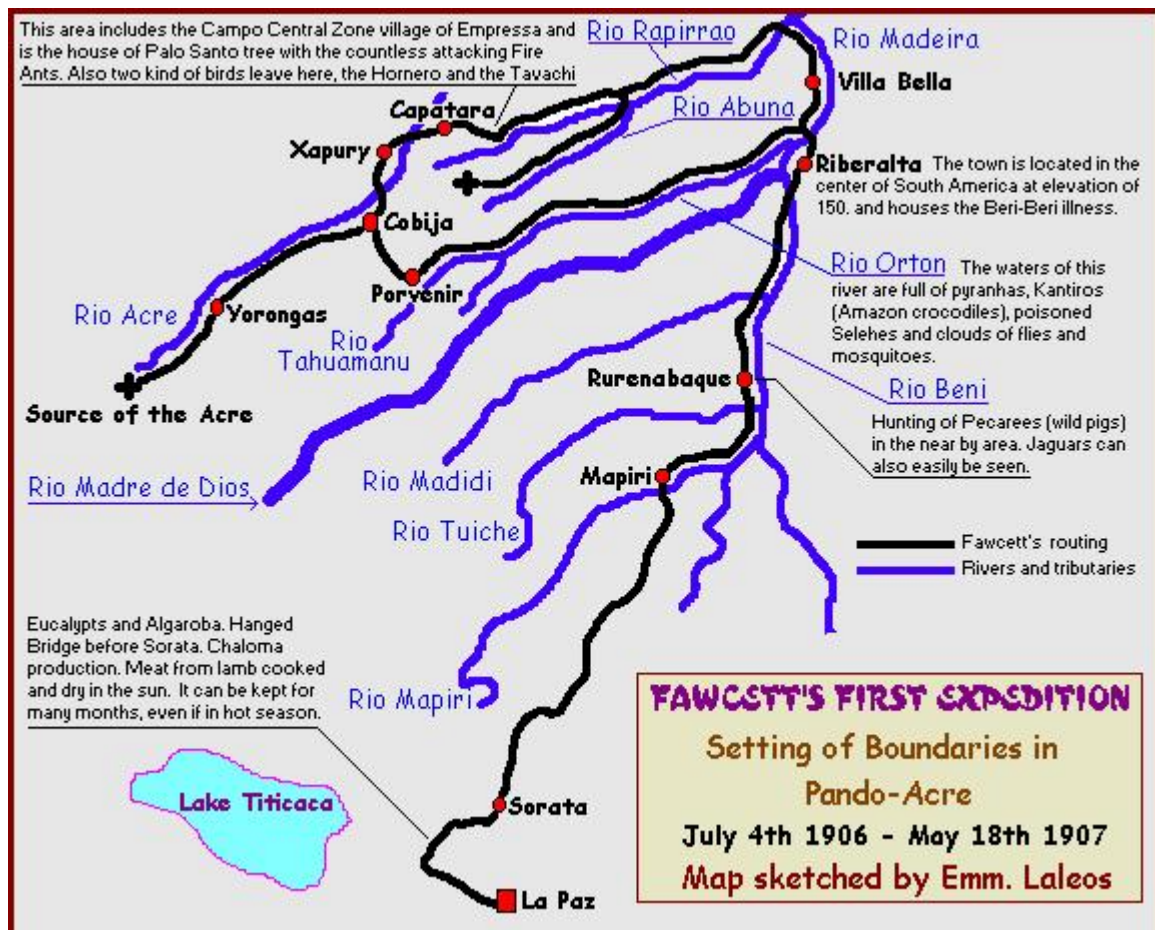
After a long passage via New York, the Panama Canal, and Peru, Fawcett arrived in La Paz, Bolivia, in June 1906. La Paz, at 3600 metres elevation, was Bolivia’s principal city. The Liberal party presided over a time of relative peace and prosperity following recent and devastating wars against Chile and Brazil in which almost half a million square kilometres of Bolivian territory, including her sea coast, were lost. Tin, silver and rubber were the main exports. Communications were extremely bad between the Andean highlands and the lowlands, creating a disunited nation. Power rested in the hands of a small white elite, comprised of landowners, politicians and Catholic church. The majority lived in poverty. With some difficulty, Fawcett eventually secured the funds, guarantees and official backing needed to begin work. Accompanied by A.J. Chalmers, Señor Carlos Dunn, and eight *peons*, Fawcett departed for his first assignment on July 4th 1906, a demarcation of the northern boundary with Brazil.



Mt. Illampu, near Sorata, at nearly 7000m, the highest peak in the Bolivian Andes

LAWLESS FRONTIERS

Acre Expedition 1906/7



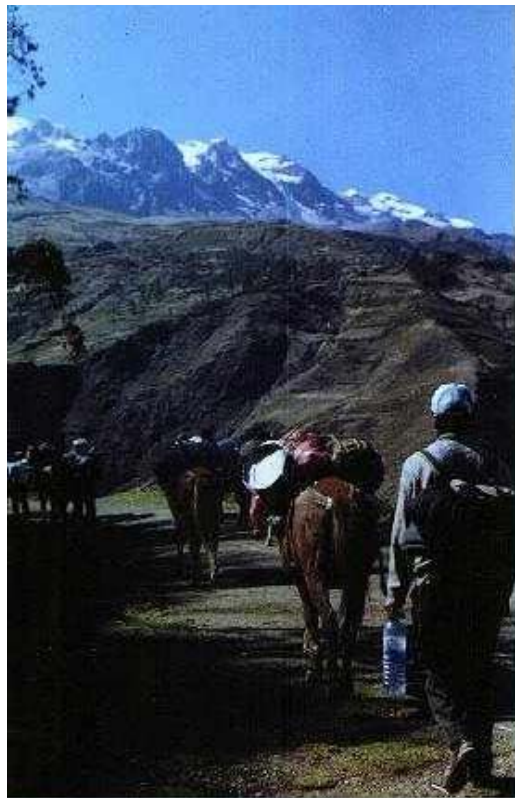
This map originally published on The Great Web Of Percy Harrison Fawcett
<http://www.phfawcettsworld.org>

The journey from La Paz to the lowland rainforests was by no means an easy one. A handful of weather-beaten huts alongside Lake Titicaca provided the only sign of life, as the convoy was dwarfed by the imposing majesty of the Eastern Cordillera. Their first port of call was Sorata, an important trading post in the fertile Yungas valleys.

High society had arrived in this charming settlement in the form of six German merchant families. Fawcett stayed as a guest at the house of Schultz, and paid tribute to the welcome he received, although it seems his host was notorious for ill-treatment of his own employees.³

³ Based on interviews with Don Alberto Koch and Louis Demers.

From Sorata, the party descended the Mapiri Trail, a toll path cut by the Richter family for the export of quinine. Much of the seven-day trek involved creeping along perilous tracks cut from the walls of vertical gorges. After a week they arrived in Mapiri, the Gateway to the Amazon basin. They found most of the villagers hopelessly inebriated. Fawcett is appalled by “the decomposing body of a man, grotesquely clutching a bottle in his hand, [lying] in a gutter”[61]. They heard whispers of further unrest in Challana, a nearby gold-mining town, where renegades and outlaws had seized control and withstood several attacks from the Bolivian Army. On 18/3/1910, *El Diario* wrote that the subversives had been pacified, although not before many a fortune had been made and lives lost in defiance of government taxation.



The Mapiri Trail – much of it remains intact today

This first encounter with anarchy and disorder was to become indicative of Fawcett’s travels in the remote Bolivian tropics. Riverbank settlements varied only in name, sharing a common disregard for civilised law. Such hedonism grew from the frenzied migration of adventurers hell-bent on finding their fortune in the great Amazonian rubber boom. By the 1860s, a few hundred Bolivian *caucheros* had already settled along the Acre, Purus and Madeira Rivers.⁴ Later expeditions led by Americans James Orton (Rio Mamoré 1877), and Edwin Heath (Rio Beni 1879), proved conclusively that both rivers were tributaries of the Madeira-Amazon trade route, and helped to destroy the myth that the rivers were the impenetrable stronghold of murderous forest Indians.

⁴ Centeno, Ricardo, *Imágenes del Auge de la Goma*, La Paz 1998. p23/29. - After the 1867 Muñoz-Netto treaty Brazil, in which Bolivia conceded territory here to Brazil, *Caucheros* began to concentrate around the Mamoré and Guaporé River Fifer (1), 117.

“Men became crazed”⁵ by rubber fever, especially when demand (and prices) rocketed after James Dunlop had patented the tyre in 1887. Bolivian rubber was recognised as the highest quality in the markets of Liverpool and New York.⁶ Thousands went in search of *Oro Negro*, colonising the sparsely populated forests of the North. Fawcett witnessed the peak of the boom (1900-1914).

So we can see the tempestuous foundation on which these riparian settlements were built. It was a Wild West dog-eat-dog atmosphere set in the tropics, where, “like a sponge the jungle absorbs and magnifies human passion.”⁷ The Beni was also traditionally a region where political exiles and troublemakers were sent, creating a fascinatingly dramatic arena. Fawcett recognised the *machismo* and corruption such an environment generated. Men would lasso jaguars out of boredom. One undertaker divided his graveyard into sections for Heaven, Purgatory and Hell, with the price of funerals rising accordingly [84].

After a tedious journey down the Rio Beni, interrupted by a weeklong wait in Rurrenabaque, the commission arrived in Riberalta, where they stayed with a Swiss, Emilio Gschwind-Zaballa.⁸ Riberalta, founded by two Germans in 1884,⁹ was the capital of the Beni department, but still notable for high levels of disease and drunkenness. Stories also began to filter through of violence, torture and murder connected with the rubber trade, such as a *barraca* station manager who used to tie Indians’ “legs together and their hands behind their backs and fling them in the river”[85].



A Bolivian Cauchero in the Ben Department c.1907

⁵ Fifer, J Valerie, (1) *The Empire Builders: A History of the Bolivian Rubber Boom and the Rise of the House of Suarez*, Journal LAS Vol.II, 1970 pp. 113-146. p124. - Quote from Dr Edwin Heath.

⁶ Lijerón Casnovas, Arnaldo, *Antonio Vaca-Diez: Genio Industrial y Geopolítico Boliviano*, Trinidad, Bolivia 1999. p174.

⁷ Taussig, Michael, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1986. p77.

⁸ Cingolani, Pablo, & Laleos, Emmanouel F.R.G.S. *To the West of the Heath River and the Tribe of the Toromonas: Within the Unexplored Madidi*, La Paz 2001. p5. The Zaballa’s were a prominent family in Bolivia, and were among the last to return to Europe in the 1960’s. The whole family are now in Europe, apart from Walter Gschwind-Zaballa, former minister of justice in Bolivia.

⁹ Centeno, 31. - Maximo Henicke and Frederico Bodo Clausen settled the site, at the confluence of the Rio Beni/Madre de Dios 3 may 1884

Along with a Scottish Bolivian and a Jamaican cook, the commission set off up the Orton. The Rio Orton had been ‘discovered’ on the Heath expedition in 1979, and claimed on behalf of Antonio Vaca-Diez, a former presidential advisor who would go on to build his empire, *The Orton Rubber Co.*, in the area. Vaca-Diez was recognised as a visionary and a man of “indomitable will power,” having established the first regional newspapers, and having navigated the first riverboat from Bolivia to Europe.¹⁰ He drowned tragically in a shipwreck in 1897, and is remembered as a great Bolivian.

After 43 days, they arrived in Porvenir and moved north overland to Cobija, giving Fawcett time to complete a survey for a railway that would later connect the towns. In Cobija, a port on the Rio Acre, Fawcett found people “languid and diseased”[90], decimated by a bizarre craving to eat earth. The town was dirty, corrupt and barbaric, but they were forced to spend Christmas 1906 there due to another delay. Only four years earlier this territory had been the battlefield of the Acre War, a rubber conflict in which Bolivia suffered the largest territorial loss in her history. The history of the war is crucial for an understanding of the horrific conditions that frequently awaited Fawcett.

When the 1867 Muñoz-Netto treaty slashed an oblique line across the map to mark the new border between Bolivia and Brazil, little foresight had been shown. Such an intangible boundary was irrelevant in a region of dense wilderness where logic dictated that rivers could be the only true boundaries. No physical demarcation of the boundary was made by either government until it was too late.¹¹ The Acre had become the richest rubber-producing region on earth and by 1900, around 60,000 Brazilians worked it, oblivious and unconcerned as to where the hypothetical border lay.¹²

In January 1899, Bolivia installed the Puerto Alonso customs house on the Acre, a move which “aggravated a situation already set on a collision course”.¹³ A rebel insurrection was overthrown by Bolivian forces, who sent casualties floating downstream as a warning to others. Seven hundred Bolivian soldiers made the unfeasible overland trudge from La Paz and Cochabamba, officially to mark the frontier according to the 1867 treaty, though continuous uprisings quickly called them into action. In 1906, Fawcett found evidence of Bolivian trails and battlefields in the area, though he “doubted the knowledge and experience of the officers responsible for them”[85].

Long distances and poor communications impeded Bolivia’s plan to colonise, control or impose sovereignty in the region. Out of desperation, the Government leased the area between the Rio Yavarí and the Rio Madera to the Anglo-American *Bolivian Syndicate of New York*.¹⁴ However, congress and neighbouring countries

¹⁰ Lijerón Casnovas, Preface. Newspapers *El Siringuito* and *La Gaceta del Norte* ran from 1887-1897. He went to recruit Europeans to fulfil his dream of populating the Bolivian Amazon

¹¹ Finot, Enrique, *Nueva Historia de Bolivia*, Fundacion Universitaria Patiño, Buenos Aires 1946. p340. The 1895 Bolivian demarcation of the Rio Yavarí was rejected by the Brazilian Government. The expedition, led by General Pando, proved a “very long process,” *El Diaro* reported on 13/7/1908, perhaps the reason for Pando’s negative assessment of the task that awaited Fawcett.

¹² Fifer, J Valerie, (2) *Bolivia: Land, Location, and Politics Since 1825*, C.U.P 1972. p123.

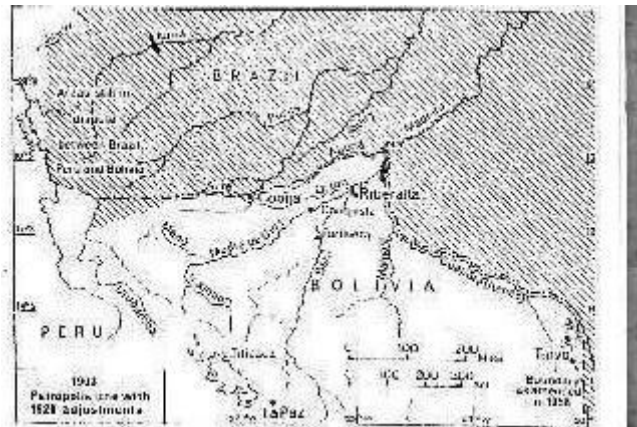
¹³ Fifer (2), 122/3. Brazilian caucheros were taxed 30% on all exports.

¹⁴ *El Diaro* 4/7/1908, 1. - A letter in March 1900 signed by Montes and President Pando appealed to London and New York for a company that could colonise & police the area, exploit riches & recover those which others have procured, administer customs and collect taxes. US Ambassador Dr Bridgman enthused “we have a firm conviction that this will rapidly transform the makeup and image of Bolivia.”

spoke out against what they felt to be US Imperialism, expressing concern over the 30-year terms.¹⁵ Brazil called it a “legal monstrosity” and responded by declaring all territory south of the oblique line to be litigious, and by closing the Amazon to Bolivian traffic.¹⁶ This had a desirably crippling effect, illustrating Bolivia’s communications problem: it was quicker to reach Europe than La Paz.

With Syndicate bosses and resources stranded in Pará, Colonel Plácido de Castro led a rebellion of Brazilian *caucheros*, declaring himself president of the Independent State of Acre in October 1902. Yet Bolivian forces fought back, most famously with the *Columna Porvenir* retaking Cobija. Years later, Fawcett passed through the region to find that “skeletons still littered the ground”[88]. He goes on to recount that not a single Brazilian was allowed to escape as the town was attacked with “burning arrows bound in petroleum soaked cotton”[88]. *Columna Porvenir* was a vigilante band of Bolivian *caucheros* from the Suarez Hermanos Company that monopolised the area. Led by Nicolas Suárez “the virtual Lord of the region,” their valiant and tenacious efforts ensured against further concession of land to Brazil, thus performing a service to the nation, and keeping the empire intact.¹⁷

Reinforcements from both armies arrived in the Acre in 1903, although they were preposterously unequal. 10,000 well-prepared, well-stocked Brazilian federal troops arrived in fast *vapores* up the Madeira River; to face a few hundred Bolivian soldiers decimated by disease and exhaustion from the gruelling four-month march. While de Castro marched towards Puerto Alonso, Brazil bought out the syndicate to appease disgruntled western markets. In an atmosphere of “putrefying corpses, an unknown hell as tragic and terrifying as any Dantean fantasy,”¹⁸ the Bolivian government had no choice but to concede. In December 1903, at the treaty of Petropolis, Bolivia lost nearly 73,000 square miles south of the 1867 line, to add to the loss of half her soldiers who fought in the campaign.¹⁹



Map showing the 1903 Petropolis Treaty

¹⁵ Fifer (2), 123.

¹⁶ *Bolivian Times* 18/1/2001, 11. - The words of foreign minister Baron de Rio Branco: “a concession similar to those of Africa, not worthy of our continent.”

¹⁷ Fellmann Velarde, José, *Historia de Bolivia Tomo III*, Los Amigos del Libro, La Paz 1981. p27.

¹⁸ *El Diaro* 20/7/1906, 3.

¹⁹ Villamil et al, *Curso de Historia de Bolivia*, Los Amigos del Libro, La Paz 1957, 111. - The Treaty was arbitrated by Great Britain.

Placido de Castro became Governor of the Federal Territory of the Acre, “proving himself an enlightened administrator.”²⁰ Originally from Southern Brazil, de Castro was an inspirational war tactician held by one Bolivian war veteran to be personally responsible for the “mutilation of our mother country”.²¹ Bolivian bitterness and fear of de Castro is shown in *El Diario* from October 1906, when they report that he is leading a new rebel group that would doubtless threaten Bolivian interests.²² It is around this time that Fawcett meets him. In return for a lift to his *barraca* at Capatara, the Acre Governor provides Fawcett’s commission with mules for their overland trail to the Abuna. Fawcett fondly remembers his modesty, “hospitality and entertaining conversation”[110], as well as his entourage of dogs. Fawcett is one of the last people to see de Castro alive, as shortly afterwards he was “shot on the trail by unknown assassins”[113]. As long as Rubber was thriving, politics in the region remained delicate, *El Diario* reporting another separatist rebellion in June 1910.

Many reasons were attributed to Bolivia’s inability to hang on to the Acre, including financial and military weakness,²³ while de Castro blamed “misgovernment”[114]. The Bolivian government did not consider the territorial loss to be of crippling significance, and displayed general apathy towards the *Colonias* at the turn of the century.²⁴ It was surprising given the economic potential of the area, not only in rubber, but also in vanilla, nuts, cacao, timber, quinine, coffee, fruit and sugar cane. Certainly long-term relations with Brazil were not seriously affected. Indeed Fawcett is furious with the lack of support he received from the Bolivian government when undertaking the demarcation. Territory was lost essentially through Bolivia’s failure to ensure the integration of distant regions through improved communications and colonisation.

*

Having mapped the course of the Bolivian Rio Acre, the group continued along to the Rio Abuna, and its tributary, the Rapirrán.²⁵ With the expedition complete, the group acquired a batelón to take them up the Rio Madeira. The passage was extremely difficult, tackling the lower section of nineteen treacherous cataracts that hindered a smooth export of rubber to the Amazon/Atlantic. Four men died of yellow fever during the trip, yet any cargo lost by an overturned boat was considered more important in an area where “rubber was prized but life was cheap.”²⁶ The banks were a hive of activity, with construction of the Madeira-Mamoré railway in progress.

²⁰ Fifer (2), 128. – Fawcett is one of the few surviving sources on this man.

²¹ Aguirre Acha, Jose, *De Los Andes al Amazonas: Recuerdos de la Campaña del Acre*, La Paz, p 25.

²² *El Diario*, 20/10/1906, 2.

²³ *El Diario* 23/10/1908, 1. – A population of 2 million could only supply a standing army of 2000 men. According to Finot [342], “the conflict could not have presented itself at a more unfortunate or inopportune moment”, as the civil war between liberals and conservatives had bled the army dry,

²⁴ *El Diario* 19/12/1907, 1. – Government reluctant to colonise the area because of poor exploit and export record.

²⁵ Fifer (2) 131. – However, 4 years later the expedition of H.A.Edwards found the true source of the river to be different to Fawcett’s location.

²⁶ Fifer (2), 115

The first attempted jungle railway to bypass the rapids was made by New Englander Colonel Church in 1871. In a spot notorious for fever, and ‘wild’ Indians who “make instruments from the shin bones of their victims,”²⁷ it was soon abandoned.

Not until 1910 was the railway dream finally realised, when an organised, well paid workforce of Chinese, Hindus, Europeans, North Americans, and West Indians were contracted by US firm Percival Farquhar. Despite improved medical care, many perished from arduous labour in the swampy jungle, and the hospital was overrun with victims of malaria, yellow fever and beri beri. Half of the men who came never returned.²⁸ Fawcett himself told in 1907 of how life expectancy on the Madeira rubber stations was a mere 5 years. But, with rubber prices at a record high, it seemed Bolivia finally held the key to colonisation and abundant prosperity.

But disaster struck in the cruellest manner. The collapse of rubber almost overnight meant the track fell into disuse. And so abruptly ended a project that had cost millions of pounds and hundreds of lives. Contemporary observer Tomlinson lamented, “No epic has been written of their tragedy. But their story is one of the saddest in the annals of commerce.”²⁹

Continuing upstream, the commission stayed as guests in Cachuela Esperanza, Headquarters of Suárez Hermanos. It is surprising that Fawcett did not rhapsodise more about this extraordinarily advanced and luxurious mini-society:

Everything functioned like a Swiss watch. All the streets were illuminated, the house walls well painted and the grass impeccably tended. It was impressive to see so much order in the middle of the jungle.³⁰

Nicolas Suárez, on hearing of the successful Heath expedition, set off two years later in 1882 to claim for his own company this vital strategic point – a hazardous rapid through which all Amazon bound traffic from the Beni and Madre de Dios must pass. Over the next 20 years he contracted European and Japanese architects and engineers to create the “capital of his empire”,³¹ a stylised city to compete with any in the western world.

When Fawcett arrived in 1907, Esperanza could accommodate 2-3 thousand employees, and boasted a radio mast, a well-stocked library, schools, restaurants, cinemas, floodlit tennis courts, a billiards salon, and a skittle alley.³² Shops sold the latest Western goods on import and famous European opera companies would come to appear in the *Teatro General Pando*. The internationally renowned hospital led the way in X-ray technology.³³ Despite benefits of free health care and education, employees were subjected to an authoritarian regime. Fawcett himself witnessed a group of women dealt twenty-five lashes for loud and drunken behaviour [124].

Fawcett also recalled German clerks being “openly hostile”[123] to the British engineers. This is curious, as Fifer insists that the day-to-day affairs of Esperanza

²⁷ Tomlinson, H.M., *The Sea and the Jungle*, Marlboro Press, Illinois 1999. p125. - George E. Church later settled in London as Vice President of the RGS.

²⁸ Fifer (1), 130.

²⁹ Tomlinson, 127 – Tomlinson was on the first steamer to go up the Rio Madeira to Porto Velho.

³⁰ Centeno, 66.

³¹ Fifer (1), 136.

³² Fifer (1), 136/7.

³³ Centeno, 59.

were left to Swiss management recruited in Zurich.³⁴ One source does however, hint at a possible segregation, documenting that the German and Swiss workers went out hunting together.³⁵ All were on the payroll of Suárez, a daring and ruthless entrepreneur who essentially controlled the entire Bolivian Acre. He bought out opponents such as *The Orton Rubber Co.*, controlled trade of other products as far afield as Peru, and was the first South American rubber baron to float his company on the London stock exchange.³⁶ One critic calls him “the Rockefeller of the rubber trade.”³⁷

They arrived back in Riberalta on May 20th 1907, but a lack of available transport hindered an immediate return to La Paz, a cause of great frustration and depression to Fawcett. He pondered over the future of the rubber trade, envisaging its imminent collapse due to poor conditions and lack of foresight to replant trees. As it would turn out, seeds transplanted in the British colonies in East Asia were about to start producing rubber. Easier access and transportation meant the Asian market could easily undercut Amazonian prices and by 1914 the latter market was in sharp decline.

The imports of whiskey, gramophones, diamonds, and French prostitutes that marked the good times in Riberalta soon vanished, and men went back to “drink cane liquor and chase Indian girls.”³⁸ It marked the end of perhaps the most dramatic chapter in Bolivian history.

After a wait of several weeks, a launch was finally requisitioned following an official complaint. The journey to Rurrenabaque took an epic 45 days, wrought with trouble caused by illness, hygiene and low water levels. He was sickened by the “filthy habits and unclean persons”[135], particularly one female passenger who lay back eating flies all day. Fawcett docked in Rurrenabaque on 24th September, which now seemed to have the “amenities of a city”[138]. After an arduous ascent via Sorata, he reached La Paz on October 17th 1907, a “bearded ruffian, burned almost black by the hot sun”[141].



A tranquil resting spot near the trading post of Sorata

³⁴ Fifer (1), 137.

³⁵ Centeno, 76.

³⁶ Francisco his brother was even the Bolivian Consul in London.

³⁷ Centeno, 136.

³⁸ Nordenskiöld, Erland, *Exploraciones y Aventuras en SudAmerica*, Plural, La Paz, 2001. p141.

As an independent foreign observer returning from the *Colonias*, Fawcett was much sought after in the capital. He reported to the US and British Embassies, who were eager to corroborate the many rumours of slavery and abuse along the rubber rivers, in which their countrymen may have participated.³⁹ US Ambassador H.G.Knowles observed:

It is practically impossible to obtain any accurate or reliable information in La Paz as to the conditions that prevail in the Beni rubber districts. All kinds of conflicting stories are to be heard. Inspectors either close their eyes... or they lie in their reports, or the cruelties and atrocities are, if not fabricated, greatly exaggerated.⁴⁰

Fawcett's casual disclosures of "slavery, bloodshed and vice"[84] echo the more famous report of Sir Roger Casement, the British MP sent to investigate alleged atrocities committed by British-backed rubber companies along the Rio Putumayo in Peru. Fawcett reported to Cecil Gosling, the British Minister, that "the treatment of Indian labourers on the Bolivian rubber estates was open to severe criticism, and that 600 lashes had been administered to individuals." Casement doubted this: asked to comment by the foreign office, he said fifty lashes usually constituted a death sentence.⁴¹ While in Riberalta Fawcett relayed a reliable story of an Indian surviving two thousand lashes [77/78].

The two men agreed that a peonage system operated at rubber stations whereby credit was advanced to employees, forcing them into debt and virtually unable to leave. According to Fawcett, this happened regardless of social status or skin colour, citing the example of one valuable employee who was forced to sell his wife and daughter to cancel his own debt after the company had kept him drunk for 3 days at his own expense [82]. Mr. Gosling, who later undertook a five-month tour of the Suárez rubber estates, called the system "undisguised slavery."⁴²

Overt enslavement was also evident in the Beni. Forest Indians in the region were caught in raids, then enslaved as tappers, servants and concubines. But in general there was a "chronic shortage of indigenous labour," leading the major rubber companies to bring "convoys of immigrants" in boats down the Rio Mamoré.⁴³ American civil engineer in Santa Cruz, Mr T. Clive Sheppard, compared the migration with "human footprints to a bear's den. They lead only one way."⁴⁴ As a boat holding thirty white men docked in Riberalta, Fawcett asked a customs official,

"What are these, slaves?"

³⁹ Unmentioned in his memoirs, Fawcett supplied the British Government with a valuable eyewitness account of the atrocities.

⁴⁰ Fifer (1), 133.

⁴¹ Fifer (1), 133. - Fawcett had never directly witnessed a 'lashing'

⁴² Fifer (1), 140. - In 1913 Putumayo disclosures forced the British backed Suárez Hermanos to declare the estates open to investigation. Gosling was "refused permission to tour very far inside the estates".

⁴³ Fifer (1), 127. This included the Vaca Diez and Suarez Hermanos Rubber Companies. They controlled the river not the government. Calls for a nationalisation of transport along the Rio Mamoré were constantly neglected, which allowed the illegal slave trade to continue flourishing.

⁴⁴ Fifer (1) 133. "A very reliable man", according to US Minister Knowles.

“Of course. It is only forest Indians who are sold openly. These *cattle* will be handed over for the value of their debts – and that value is the market value of their bodies.”

[...]“Was this 1907, or had time slipped back a thousand years?”[127/128]

The scouring of towns and forests for labour was exhaustive. As minister Gosling reported in 1913, “Trinidad, Santa Ana and Santa Cruz have been denuded of male labour, and the provinces of Mojos, Velasco and Chiquitos.... are completely depopulated.”⁴⁵ *El Diario*’s criticism of the Guayaro Missions for not encouraging colonisation of the Beni reflected the widespread ignorance in the capital towards the true situation in the Beni.⁴⁶

Rubber bosses were also guilty of murder and torture. Fawcett collected gruesome tales to match the brutal and sadistic accounts of the Putumayo. Casement had relayed sickening images of starving Indians eating maggots from their own wounds, children being burned alive, an innocent man having his genitals smashed, and a station manager forcing “burning firebrands into a woman’s vagina.”⁴⁷

Amongst Fawcett’s gory catalogue is the story of two European *caucheros* in the Beni, who led a massacre of an entire Guayaro village, killing children “by dashing their brains out against trees”, and throwing “babies up in the air [to] catch them on the points of machetes”[73].

Both accounts capture the oppressor’s depraved sense of sport/entertainment. A Consul-general reported to Casement: “Such men had lost all sight or sense of rubber gathering – they were simply beasts of prey who lived upon the Indians and delighted in shedding their blood.”⁴⁸ Aimless bloodshed certainly seemed at odds with the scarce supply of labour. A contemporary British observer pronounced that “love of inflicting agony for sport is a curious psychic attribute of the Spanish race.”⁴⁹ Fawcett’s outlook was more circumspect, hinting at similar abuses in the British Colonies of North Africa, and wisely remarking that “the remoteness of a place like Riberalta is difficult to grasp”[129]. Taussig adds that slavery “was so routine that even progressive antislavery minded foreigners could quite unselfconsciously take advantage of it.”⁵⁰

While there is inevitably a degree of fantasy and embellishment on both sides, it is clear that, whether provoked or not, the forest Indians sometimes retaliated. Fawcett related the inevitable scare stories such as white *caucheros* found “chopped into little bits, floating down river,” and the sole survivor of a slaving expedition returning “quite mad, munching the rotting flesh on a human thighbone”[128]. Yet Fawcett was physically attacked himself, surviving a shower of arrows from a riverbank ambush. On the Rio Madeira, the pilot of his boat went looking for food and was found with forty-two arrows in his body [120]. General Pando’s narrow escapes are also well documented, and there are several authentic stories of similar Indian ambush attacks.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Fifer (1), 140.

⁴⁶ *El Diario* 12/9/1906, 2.

⁴⁷ Taussig 47/8. -The Indian woman had refused to be his concubine

⁴⁸ Taussig, 48.

⁴⁹ Taussig, 52. – The quote is from Charles Reginald Enock F.R.G.S.

⁵⁰ Taussig, 62

⁵¹ Pando related his narrow escape of 1906 to Fawcett [74]. Other sources also mention the hostility in the area. Centeno, [24] explains how on 15/7/1893, dozens of women and children were slaughtered at *barraca* Bueno Retiro by “barbarians.” Fifer (1), 136 documents how Gregorio Suarez (Nicolás’

Such was the distance between the Rubber Rivers and La Paz that the government was helpless to intervene. Corrupt and brutal managers ruled with impunity, and as Fawcett told the US Minister, it would have been “dangerous for an honest investigator, unsupported by powerful governmental influence, and alone, to enter this region.”⁵²

Fawcett realised the folly of judging the situation with the rigid morality of advanced civilisation. In the words of one Spanish missionary, “the jungle is a degeneration of the human spirit in a swoon of improbable but real circumstances.”⁵³ While Fawcett recognised this he still believed that the rubber boom also attracted the “scum of Europe and Latin America”[127].

It is generally acknowledged, however, that conditions in the Beni were not as bad as in the Putumayo. Based on a recorded conversation between Fawcett and Sheppard, US Minister Holmes wrote:

“It is well known that the Bolivian rubber district is very rich, and that its resources are not in the nearly exhausted condition of the Putumayo. There is apparently a more humane demand for slave labour in the Beni, and the Beni is a region somewhat less lawless. The high value and the relative scarcity of labour make it uneconomical for the controlling interests to treat human life lightly.”⁵⁴

Mr Gosling agreed, adding that, “except in very unusual instances, it would not appear that natives are tortured by their employers.”⁵⁵ The situation would only change with the collapse of the rubber trade, a few years later. Calls for a federation of independent states to restore control were rejected by a government wary of granting autonomy to the unstable Beni region.

Fawcett met with President Ismael Montes,⁵⁶ and far from being put off by the depressing stages of his journey, he agreed to return the following year to carry on survey work in the Bolivian *Oriente*.

brother) was violently killed by treacherous Caripunas, who then placed his severed head on a spear and drank the unfortunate *Cauchero*'s cognac. Eventually, Nicolas Suárez showed up to avenge the killing, annihilating every man in the camp.

⁵² Fifer (1), 134.

⁵³ Taussig, 82.

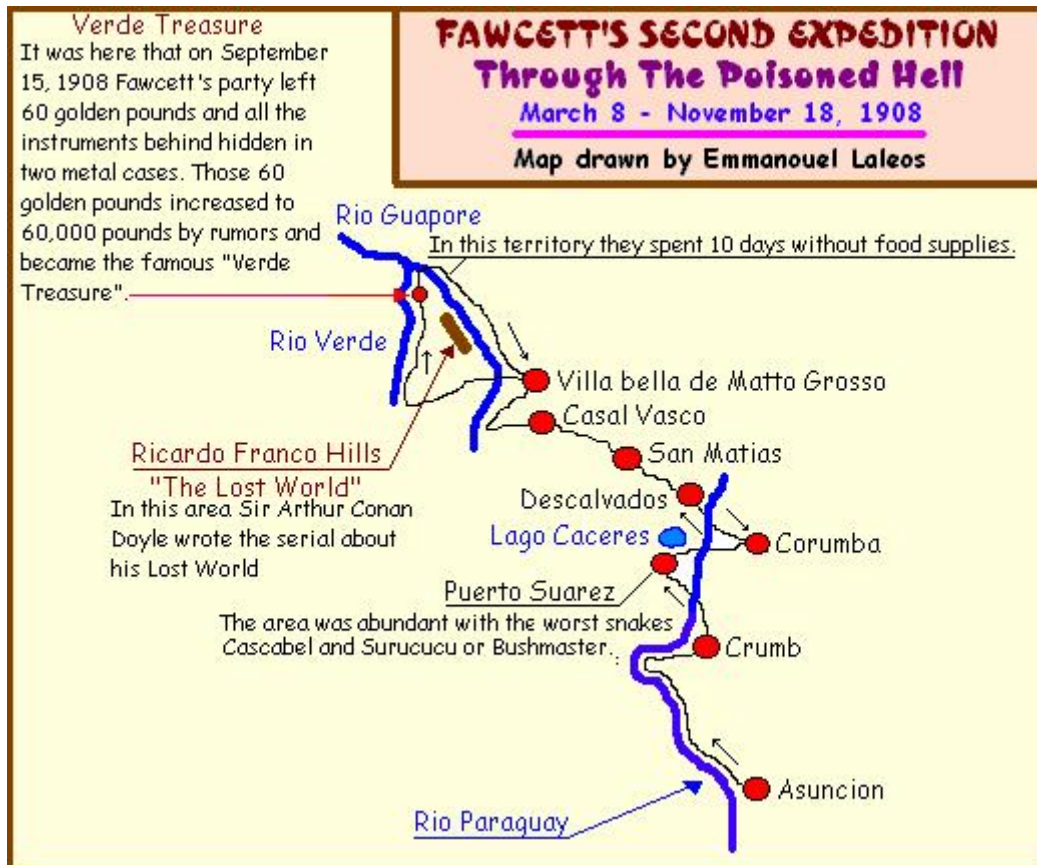
⁵⁴ Fifer (1), 133/4.

⁵⁵ Fifer (1), 140.

⁵⁶ Klein, Herbert S. *Parties and Political Change in Bolivia 1880-1952*, Cambridge University Press 1969. p38. He posthumously describes Montes as “often amoral, fraudulent, unethical and oblivious at times to the liberal ideal.”

A LOST WORLD

River Verde Expeditions 1908/9



This map originally published on The Great Web Of Percy Harrison Fawcett
<http://www.phfawcettsworld.org>

Fawcett's euphoria at returning to the tranquillity and security of family life in Devon quickly passed. One day a gramophone record reminded him of the Acre's "slow-moving river like molten gold in the glow of the sunset. The menacing dark-green walls of the forest closed in... Inexplicably – amazingly – I knew I loved that hell. Its fiendish grasp had captured me"[143]. It would mean a life surrounded by disease, death, insects, suffocating heat, and the monotony and frustration of jungle travel. Yet he felt imprisoned by the restrictions of life in England and the lure of danger and excitement, from now until his disappearance, was irresistible. So Fawcett parted once more from his family, leaving Southampton on March 6th 1908, with a new assistant, F.G. Fisher.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Fisher would later work in the Chaco upon Fawcett's recommendation before resigning in 1910

Via Buenos Aires, Asunción and the Rio Paraguay, they arrived in the port city of Corumba, in the Brazilian *Pantanal*. Here, a survey of the Bolivia-Brazil border around Lake Caceres was carried out alongside a Brazilian Commission. Fawcett commented on the enormous gulf between the two countries, celebrating the civilised nature of Brazilian towns and people in contrast to the godforsaken ‘towns’ across the border.⁵⁸ He cites superior communication and state support, especially for the indigenous forest peoples.

With work completed by July, Fawcett is enticed by the offer of mapping the unexplored Verde, a remote river in north-eastern Bolivia that formed the frontier with Matto Grosso in Brazil. A previous attempt in 1877 had mistaken the Rio Tarvo for the Rio Verde.⁵⁹ Being “essentially an explorer”[151], Fawcett agreed in defiance of the British Consul’s warning “it’ll never be explored on foot. Many expeditions have gone there only to be lost”[150].

Along with Fisher, a Scot (Urquhart), and six *peons*, the expedition headed towards the border towns Descalvados and San Matías, finding them in an ongoing war. “Brazilian bandits trespass and prowl our territory. They have attacked and robbed the people of San Matías,”⁶⁰ *El Diario* reported in 1907. Fawcett merely despaired at the hopelessness of such depressing backwaters.

Across a landscape of swamps and abandoned cattle haciendas, the commission eventually reached Vila Bela do Matto Grosso, the former capital of the region, now a ghost town, inhabited only by a few former black slave families, living in fear of the wild Indians who roam the streets at night.⁶¹ Fawcett was moved by the faded grandeur of the city, the “joys and sorrows of the vanished people”[154].



The Guaporé River

Following the Rio Guaporé, they soon fixed camp at the mouth of the Verde, posting a night watchman for fear of Indian attack. Ahead stood the Ricardo Franco Hills, a seemingly impenetrable sandstone mesa, rising out of the forest for some 120 miles, its 200ft summit so smooth it “could have been pared by a giants cheese-

⁵⁸ Abecia Baldivieso, Valentin, *Las Relaciones Internacionales en la Historia de Bolivia Tomo III*, Los Amigos del Libro, La Paz 1986. p314. – The Brazilian rubber industry was always more competent as it had state support, a company of *vapores* and more densely populated areas.

⁵⁹ Galvarro Rosales, Jorge Soria, *La Tímida Historia Diplomática de Bolivia*, Sirena, Santa Cruz 2000. p106.

⁶⁰ *El Diario* 16/1/1907, 1.

⁶¹ It had been deserted in 1880 after the abolition of slavery. 1906 Field Marshall Rondon, installed telegraph line in 1906.

knife.”⁶² Touched by the eerie fortress of nature, Fawcett mused, “time and the foot of man had not touched those summits. They stood like a lost world, forested to their tops, and the imagination could picture the last vestiges there of an age long vanished”[159]. In a Royal Geographical Society Lecture in 1911, Fawcett alluded to the mysterious hinterlands, adding: “There are tracks of strange beasts, huge and unrecognised, in the mud of the beaches of these lakes behind the unknown forests.”⁶³



The awesome mesa of the Ricardo Franco Hills

The rich imagery of Fawcett’s reports was not lost on one member of the audience. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle shared the explorer’s vision, going on to write *The Lost World*, the classic novel where a scientific expedition encounters pterodactyls, dinosaurs and ape-men. Doyle’s mountain itself, writes Cowell, “seems to have a malevolent being.”⁶⁴

One wonders how Professor Challenger’s lecture at the end of the novel, in which he talks of dinosaurs and releases a live pterodactyl, would have contrasted with Fawcett’s own controversial addresses. Perhaps even Lord John Roxton, the dashing big game hunter, was based on Colonel Fawcett.

Difficult rapids on the Verde soon forced them to sink their canoes, bury their stores and walk to the source. On September 15th, they set off, finding rubber trees untouched, and no obvious sign of Indian presence. After eight days they ran out of food, and the bitterness of the river means they were forced to survive the next ten on

⁶² Cowell, Adrian, *The Heart of the Forest*, Victor Gollancz Ltd London 1960. p17. The tableland was also known as Roraima and Huanchaca

⁶³ Cingolani & Laleos, 65/6.

⁶⁴ Cowell, 18. - Fawcett did not discover the hills. Schomburgk in mid 1800’s and many others had mused on its arrested zoological development, lost cities and diamonds. It seems Fawcett was the first to scale them.

a meagre batch of bird eggs and palmetto, finally reaching the source on October 3rd. As Fisher and Urquhart complained of starving, Fawcett showed his military toughness, pulling them into line to avoid a potential mutiny by the Indian peons.



The Starvation Party

Returning via a more direct route, the group appeared unable to escape from the towering Ricardo Franco Hills. One Indian threw in the towel and laid down to die. That is until Fawcett jabbed him in the ribs with his hunting knife and forced him to carry on.

At last, on October 13th, with the group close to death, a deer came into view, and it was Fawcett who managed to fire the crucial shot that may well have saved their lives. At no other time is the strength of Fawcett's character so perfectly illustrated. His enormous reserve of spirit and endurance are shown as he essentially saved the lives of the whole party, although it highlights his distaste for carrying excess human baggage. It is another of the "very narrow escapes"[188] that characterise his Bolivian expeditions. When the deer appeared, it led him to believe he was truly blessed with miraculous good fortune.

Soon they found a way down from the plateau and after six days were back in Vila Bela do Matto Grosso. Here a congratulatory letter from General Pando awaited them. As Beni Prefect, Pando supervised all of Fawcett's expeditions, and the mutual respect is obvious:

A man of striking appearance and marked ability. He probably knew more about the country than any of his compatriots. He was the first official I had met who really knew what work was required of the commission [76].

Fawcett's glowing impression of Pando is matched by many historical sources. Born in 1848, he studied medicine in La Paz before joining the military. Decorated for bravery in War of the Pacific, an injury forced him out of action, and he became a man of letters and satirical sketches. His involvement in subversive liberal activities

led to imprisonment.⁶⁵ Having had a death sentence pardoned he switched his attention to the rich and unknown rubber lands of the north-west. His expeditions between 1892-1898 produced invaluable maps and information.

One historian observed that Pando possessed the “personal qualities of character, physical magnetism, intellectual vigour, and intuition to interpret and translate to the masses, that define the *caudillo*”.⁶⁶

During his term as the first liberal president (1899-1904), Pando bravely led troops on the front line in Acre war. In all areas of government, science, geography, communication, education and Indian rights, the country thrived. Mysteriously assassinated in 1917 in La Paz, Pando had contributed more than anyone to the knowledge and unification of Bolivia’s distant lands.⁶⁷

Whilst Fisher and Pacheco rested, Fawcett ventured alone on horseback to visit the Parecis Indians. On reaching Corumbá they were welcomed back as heroes, although five of the six Indians had died. Fawcett once again returned home under the promise of returning to corroborate his findings the following year.

*

They retraced the route on June 13th 1909 with a Bolivian named Pacheco. In Vila Bela do Matto Grosso they linked up with the Brazilian commission. This time it took sixteen days from the mouth to the source of the Verde, pegging the boundary as they went. Arriving at the source with Colonel Lemenha, Fawcett left his Brazilian counterpart to wait for the others, while he returned with fewer obstacles than in the preceding year.



Fawcett and Fisher at the Picada de Caceres

Their overcrowded boat sunk on arrival in Corumbá, drowning one man, leaving the locals in hysterics, and Fawcett bemoaning “an undignified entrance for an International Boundary Commission”[173]. Later it emerged that Fawcett had wrongly identified the source of the Rio Verde. In 1946, Col. Bandeira found another branch of the river to lead to its true source [172]. However, “as a sign of good

⁶⁵ *El Diario* 3/7/1908, 1.

⁶⁶ Fellmann Velarde, 16.

⁶⁷ Villamil et al, p107.

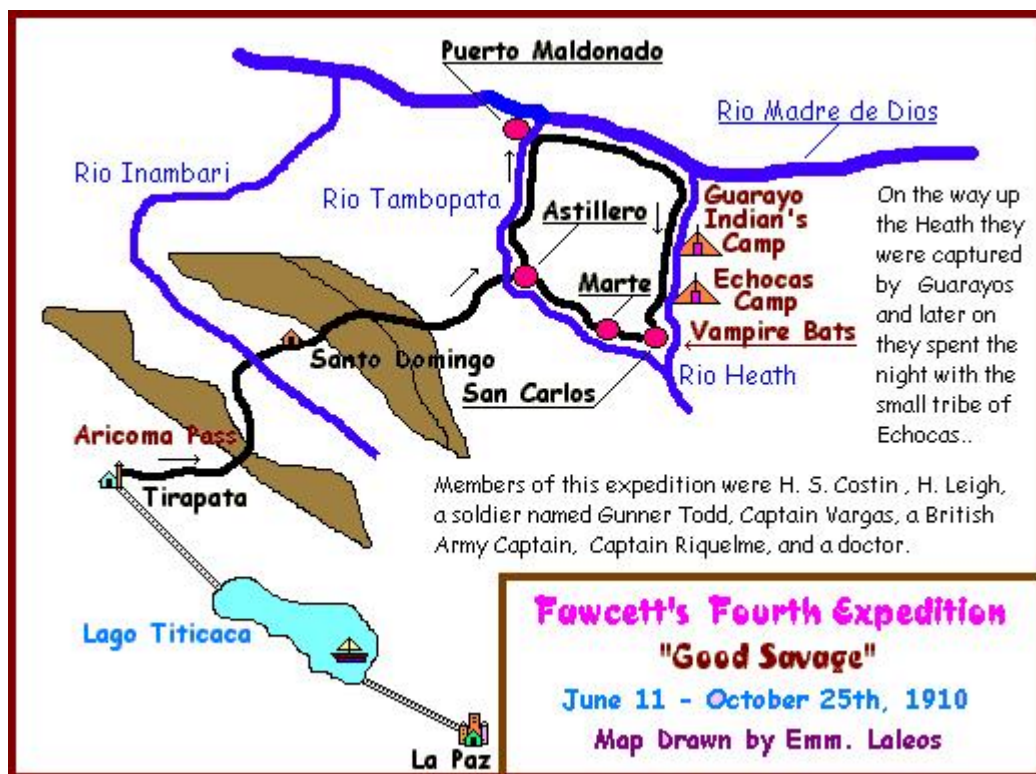
friendship,” the findings of the 1909 Admiral Candido Guillobel – General Pando Commission has remained on official maps.⁶⁸

They arrived in La Paz via the Falkland Islands after briefly being held prisoner by Paraguayan rebels. In a meeting with Eliodoro Villazon, the new Bolivian President, Fawcett was invited to help settle the long running border dispute with Peru in the territory north of Lake Titicaca. The army however, would not grant Fawcett permission to work on another assignment for the Bolivian Government. Faced with a straight choice between returning to routine army life in Europe and carry on exploration in South America, he chose the latter. Furious with what he felt to be ignorance and inflexibility on the part of the army, Fawcett unceremoniously retired from duty.

⁶⁸ Galvarro Rosales, 106/7. - In 1949, Dr Jorge Escobari Cusicanqui confirmed the Verde’s principal source to be in a different location, but the old one remained on maps after 1958.

AN INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT

River Heath Expeditions 1910/11



This map originally published on The Great Web Of Percy Harrison Fawcett <http://www.phfawcettsworld.org>

Fawcett returned satisfied with his contingent: two NCO's from the Rifle Regiment, H C Costin and H Leigh, and an old army "sparring partner," Gunner Todd. He arrived in La Paz, dining with Villazon again on June 10th 1910. Doubtless they discussed the volatile political situation between Bolivia and Peru regarding the border around the uncharted Rio Heath. In 1902 Argentina had been asked to arbitrate the dispute over a boundary based on an inaccurate map from 1810. The only significant illuminations in the region came from General Pando's 1892-4 expeditions, the advances of a few hardy *caucheros*,⁶⁹ and the establishment of a Bolivian customs post at Puerto Heath in 1897. However, neither country was satisfied by Argentina's final decision, Bolivia suspending diplomatic relations with Buenos Aires until December 1910.⁷⁰ Both Bolivian and Peruvian newspapers

⁶⁹ *El Diario de Buenos Aires*, 29/7/1906, 2. – "few regions in SA are still more unknown and more mysterious." "neither country has geographers who deserve the name". In 1897, a band of armed *caucheros* in the heart of the jungle had declared the Republic of El Dorado. On the way to throw a coup d'etat, drunk on enthusiasm and liquor, they drowned when their boat sunk on the Urubamaba.

⁷⁰ Fifer (1), 142. Many (Suarez) stations had been awarded to Peru. To avoid another Acre, Brazil encouraged a modification in Bolivia's favour which was accepted.

vociferated with patriotic fervour, accusing one another of military aggression and incursions into the no-man's zone.



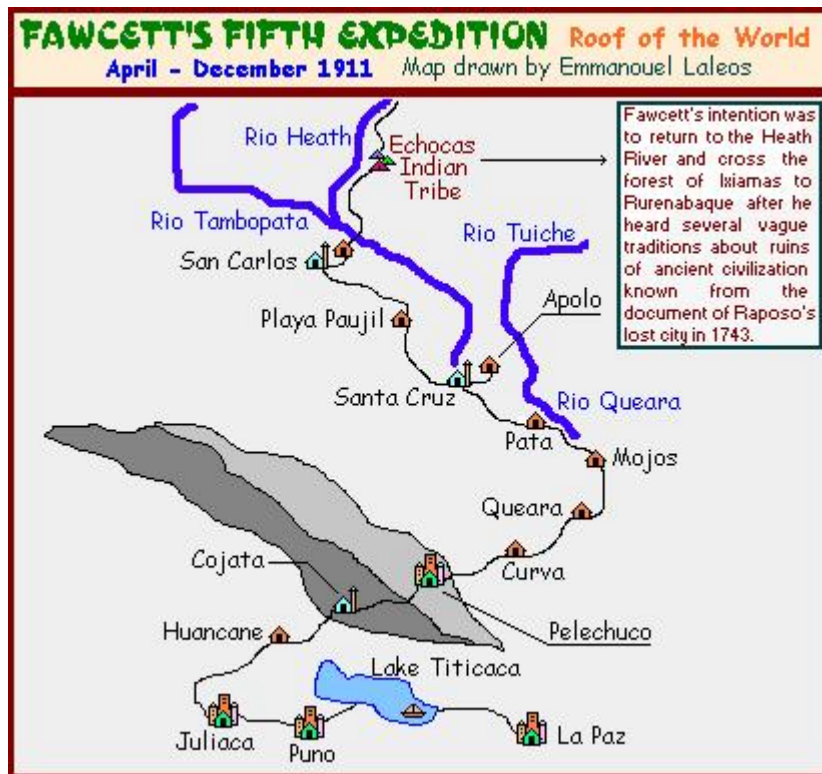
Fawcett in 1911, Juliaca, Peru

The commission followed a wet and hazardous trail across the Peruvian Andes to the Astillero, where they were warned by two officers that on the Rio Heath, “the savages are so bad that it means certain death”[185]. They received similar warnings at the mouth of the Heath, from Major Aldasozo of the Bolivian Garrison, yet Fawcett chose to ignore them and began the delimitation. Back in England, Fawcett would tell of entire expeditions, sometimes of a hundred men, who had failed to return from the Caupolicán through “disasters attributed to insects, disease, starvation, lack of transport, head hunting and water poisoning by savages.”⁷¹

After seven quiet days – heading up river by canoe, they came across a large Indian encampment. Heading for shore, they were ambushed by a fearsome shower of arrows and guns. In an extraordinary scene, the commission began singing, “as though passing a jolly hour in an English pub,” with Todd on the accordion and Fawcett on the flageolet, to pacify the Indians [188]. Baffled - “eyes rounded in amazement were peering at us” – the attackers gradually relented. Friendship was established: Fawcett gave the *cacique* his Stetson, and in return some Echoca warriors joined the party. It turned out the attack was in response to years of massacres carried out by nearby rubber companies. Further on Fawcett resolved another sticky situation with his courageously peaceful overtures, claiming “self respect prohibited retreat”[193]. On September 14th, the map was completed where the Heath channelled into a tiny brook. From there a leisurely return was made to La Paz, via the Rio Tambopata and Astillero, whereupon Leigh and Todd elected to go home.

*

⁷¹ Fawcett, *Further explorations on the River Heath*: RGS Geographic Journal XXXVII 1911: 377-82



This map originally published on The Great Web Of Percy Harrison Fawcett <http://www.phfawcettsworld.org>

In early April 1911, the Bolivian commission with Fawcett at the helm set off from La Paz again, to officially mark the border in tandem with a Peruvian Commission. Further clashes had taken place between the two armies. The Bolivian Commission was joined by Manley, a young British N.C.O. familiar to Fawcett, and Caspar Gonzales, a Bolivian officer. It appears that a Mr Wilson and a Captain Edwards, Captains Vargas and Riquelme,⁷² a Mr Gibbs, Mr Simpson, and a young doctor⁷³ were also present. Fawcett was infuriated by the “exquisite captain” Edwards’ (though he does not name him directly) refusal to talk to the lower ranking NCOs, and was relieved when he returned to La Paz, scared by the threat of Indian attacks. The full party was as follows:

Rio Suches - Madre de Dios Boundary delimitation

Bolivian Commission:
 Head - Señor Lino Romero
 Deputy – Colonel Fawcett
 Assistants – N.N. Costin
 - Leigh
 - Constantino Mariscal
 - Andrés Salinas
 - Gabriel Andrade

⁷² Fifer (1), 147. Angered by the additions, Fawcett felt a large group was slow and easy to attack.

⁷⁴ www.phfawcettsworld.org - The official report does not mention such a large group.



Fawcett (right) with Costin, Manley and the Police Comisario

Peruvian Commission:
 Head: Col J.A. Woodroffe
 Assistants: Capt. J.M. Olivera
 Capt. H.S. Toppin
 Lt. M.R. Nanson
 Lt. C.G. Moores
 Lt. N. Salaverry⁷⁴

After meeting in Juliaca on June 2nd, the two parties spent three months undertaking triangulation surveys in the highlands around Cojata. Although mesmerised by the towering white summits and glorious constellations of the *altiplano* winter, many fell victim to the bitter cold, sunburn, and *soroche*.



Bitter temperatures and high altitudes in the Bolivian Altiplano

A correspondent from *El Diario* joined the commission, sending some valuable, though slightly prejudiced reports back to the capital. They lend weight to Fawcett's description of a diplomatic quagmire, marked by non co-operation and mutual

⁷⁴ Pinilla

distrust. “I must announce that neither commission have worked in agreement or together for a single moment”⁷⁵ the journalist divulged. “Our technical team have mapped from Palomani peak to Huaycho, while, Fawcett assures us, the Peruvians have done little if anything. Fawcett has made accurate triangulations over nearly 50 leagues. In three months, the Peruvian commission has covered seven.”⁷⁶

In the Suches Valley, an area mainly populated by Bolivian Alpaca farmers, allegations arose over unlawful border tampering by the Peruvian commission. In his memoir, Fawcett accused Colonel Woodroffe, his counterpart in the Peruvian team, of “destroying some of the numbered cairns I had erected,” adding that the locals resentment “was not confined to the wholly ignorant”[204].

El Diario quoted from a letter Fawcett wrote to Woodroffe criticising his actions and stressing that, “as an English Officer, he shouldn’t lend himself to such incorrect procedure.” In reply Woodroffe asserted that the new landmarks were only provisional, but the correspondent was sure that “Señor Fawcett wouldn’t see it that way. Why didn’t they do it while we were there?”⁷⁷

In his own account, Woodroffe declared that “the Bolivian Indians amused themselves by putting down our cairns as fast as we put them up - destroyed with the connivance of the other commission”.⁷⁸ The juvenile nature of the affair did not, fortunately, materialise into all-out war.

Finally, “bored of wasting time in that area,”⁷⁹ Colonel Fawcett left for temperate Pelechuco, where a German-Bolivian Carlos Franck entertained them for several days, regaling his guests with stories of poltergeists and the time he was man-hunted by a council of king condors. Fawcett’s ready belief in such tales shows not, perhaps, a groundless obsession with the occult, but a flexibility to appreciate the profundity of the Andean belief system.



The Yungas valleys – A Bolivian Eden, but tough going

⁷⁵ *El Diario* 23/7/1911, 1. – letter from SS. Correspondent 6/11/1911

⁷⁶ *El Diario* 11/7/1911, 1. – Letter from Pelechuco. Back in Peru, Fawcett encountered a group of Indians desperate to avoid working as carriers for the Peruvian Boundary Commission.

⁷⁷ *El Diario* 11/7/1911, 1.

⁷⁸ Fifer (1), 147.– Interestingly Joseph Woodroffe was employed by Arana in Peru, a company accused of slavery and torture. He later wrote “the rubber Industry of the Amazon” in 1915. Taussig, 54.

⁷⁹ *El Diario* 11/7/1911, 1.

The group continued onwards to Apolo via the Tambopata and Santa Cruz Del Valle, descending what Fawcett considered to be the worst of the multitude of terrifying Bolivian trails. Twelve mules fell to their death.

Squalid, fever-ridden and destitute, Apolo, an old mission town, did little to improve Fawcett's impression of tropical Bolivia. One source however claims the town was far more prosperous and bustling than Fawcett recounted.⁸⁰ Here he was a guest of a "cheerful and capable" Englishman named Flower [209]. The Flowers and the Francks were among a number of foreign families who exploited the rubber boom and then moved on.⁸¹ Locals blamed Flower for the fire that destroyed Apolo, for his house was the only one that survived the blaze. According to the *Historia de Apolo*, the great fire of October 12th 1911, stoked by a drought and high wind, lasted a week, destroying crops, animals and houses. The Europeans' brick houses survived, except for Emilio Franck's storehouse which sent "running rivers of molten rubber trickling down the hill," and the liquor distillery at the Casa Neilsen Reyes, which sent flames thirty metres in the air. Some rebuilt, others left for good to Pelechuco or La Paz. Heretics like Flower were blamed, and gossip continued in the streets for years to come.⁸²

As Manley returned to Santa Cruz to escort a European naturalist, the others made for San Carlos, via Boturo and Asuriama. Going was hard due to heavy rainfall and hurricanes, but eventually they reached Playa Paujil, at the source of the Heath, connecting with the work of 1910. The Peruvian Commission had withdrawn from the demarcation of this critical 130-mile long river frontier, perhaps due to the threat of Indian attack. Fawcett's map of the Heath remains the officially excepted map to this day.⁸³

Only one lone pillar was planted, at the mouth of the Rio Colorado, as "rugged relief and impenetrable forest led to agreement that map was all that would ever be required."⁸⁴

Returning via San Carlos, Fawcett was revered by the locals for his white water rafting prowess. Indeed he sung its praises and dangers 50 years before it became a recreational sport.

The work was completed but both the biologist and Manley were seriously ill. Fawcett criticised but didn't name the scientist, who, according to Cingolani & Laleos, was James Murray, a participant in Sir Ernest Shackleton Antarctic Expeditions.⁸⁵ The return to La Paz marked the end of Fawcett's involvement with

⁸⁰ Machicado Gamez, Cesar Augusto, *Historia de Apolo y de la Provincia Franz Tamayo*, Producciones Cima, La Paz 1990. p130. – 1906-12 – "rubber exploitation, creating immense activity, with many people arriving from the interior as well as the exterior, opening of mule trails in all directions from Apolo, and consequently, work and money for everyone."

⁸¹ On his Madidi expedition, Pablo Cingolani found Carlos Franck's house still standing, as well as meeting Fernando Flower, great grandson of Henry Flower.

⁸² Machicado, 138/9

⁸³ Fifer (1), 148 - a French commission refused to complete the delimitation "because of savages." [220]

⁸⁴ Fifer (1), 147. In 2002 the area is populated and sorely in need of an artificial boundary.

⁸⁵ Cingolani & Laleos, 65.

the Bolivian government. President Villazon reluctantly received Fawcett's resignation, but understood his unwillingness to work in such an explosive situation.⁸⁶

Fawcett, although bored of the "tedious routine" of survey work [150], was disappointed to see an unsatisfactory conclusion to the work. As with army fiasco, the unyielding chains of bureaucracy, and the inefficiency of his colleagues had once again denied Fawcett the chance of following his own convictions. It now appeared that the only person he could fully rely on was himself. Fawcett sailed home early in the New Year anxious to come back to "the private exploration I was itching to make"[220].

⁸⁶ Villamil et al, 124. Villazon was "a man highly thought of by his peers" and "one of the most honest, tranquil and level headed administrations the country had enjoyed in its history". He recorded a rare budget surplus.

IN SEARCH OF LOST CITIES

Private Explorations 1913/14

Fawcett came back to La Paz with Costin and Todd in early 1913, with the intention of exploring the Caupolicán for pre-Incan ruins. Macchu Picchu had been discovered two years previously by the Yale expedition, whetting Fawcett's appetite yet further. He was also interested by stories of a mysterious and enormous 'monster', frequently spotted in the swamps of the Madidi, having previously found small dinosaur skeletons on his trip to the Acre.⁸⁷ The band of adventures found Rurrenabaque to be the same lively town as in 1907, although signs in the decline of the rubber trade were to be seen. However, news of a diamond rush led the gang to Tumupasa, accompanied by a Texan Prospector called Ross.

Throughout *Exploration Fawcett*, we come into contact with a number of colourful foreign immigrants exploring the possibilities of life in the New World. Historically, Bolivia has been a favourite destination for adventurous travellers, its vast, remote terrain providing a haven for fugitives and hermits and a goldmine for the daring entrepreneur. No extradition laws and a general lack of restrictions made it a "happy hunting ground of the ne'er-do-well, the remittance-man and the fortune-hunter." At the turn of the century, Bolivia had neither the financial nor the labour capacity to fully exploit her phenomenal natural wealth. Newspapers desperately appealed for foreigners to come and colonise the depopulated territories. "All climates are here" one implored, "for the Sicilian who wants heat, for the Finn who wants cold."⁸⁸ Many arrived, including 200 Japanese who came to Riberalta in 1905.⁸⁹ A newspaper, the La Paz Journal, was published for the benefit of the 1000 strong Anglo-US contingent in the capital. The English especially, seemed to be held in high esteem. It is axiomatic in all Spanish America," commented one observer, "that the word of an Englishman stands first."⁹⁰

Not all visitors were greeted so warmly, however. One critic called for a law to stop the less desirable refugees abusing Bolivian hospitality.

An impressionable nation, with easily deceived masses, could be steered by pernicious elements in the tortuous direction of other societies in profound crisis. The influx of crooks and racketeers could put our country, already deficient in its police and criminal justice system, into a state of ruin.⁹¹

⁸⁷ In 1975, Simon Bastos an elderly river guide claimed a long necked monster destroyed his canoe on a small Amazon tributary. In 1998, Canadian geologist, Dr Vagner, explored the myth of the long necked Madidi Monster, finding nothing.<http://www.genesispark.com/genpark/diplo/diplo.htm>

⁸⁸ El Diario 28/8/1908, 1.

⁸⁹ Fifer (1), 139. Ex peru rubber employees who took work as gardeners, fishermen and carpenters.

⁹⁰ Taussig, 29. Contested a Mr Gubbins Chairman of Arana Rubber Company.

⁹¹ El Diaro 18/8/1907, 3.

Fawcett introduces us to many shady renegades, such as a “dour, red headed Scotsman” who led Indian tribes on raids against civilisation [238], and a mad Belgian cattle farmer who shot Indians from his veranda “for the fun of watching their contortions!”[252]. Unscrupulous Europeans were responsible, either directly or indirectly, for many of the atrocities of the rubber trade.

Stories of fugitive criminals, who had come in search of a more tranquil existence, fascinated Fawcett. He showed an almost heroic reverence to a Texas Outlaw who had “blasted his way through Mexico and South America in a haze of gunsmoke”[138]. Tomlinson shared Fawcett’s romantic regard for these liberated, maverick *land sailors*, finding them “always entertaining, often instructive, for their naïve opinions cut our conventions across the middle, showing surprising insides.”⁹² Fawcett was intrigued by, and perhaps envious of men who had surrounded themselves with various Indian and half-caste girls. He frequently remarked on the wild beauty of the local women, especially one “she-devil,” who could “have roused the passions of a saint”[96].

More than anything, however, Fawcett was seduced by the lifestyle of the reclusive foreigner, who had rejected amenities and the “artificial life of civilisation,” in favour of the “extreme simplicity” of the wilderness [114]. He believed that Englishmen could “‘go native’ more readily than any other European,” especially those from refined backgrounds [209].



In search of the simple? Sunset on the Rio Guaporé

All of which should lead to a conclusion that this was what Fawcett was looking for. Consistent with his interest in Buddhism, he admired men who, by escaping the superfluous materialism of the west, were more likely to “find the true meaning of life”[251]. Nevertheless, his restless wanderings were far from over.

From Santa Cruz Del Valle, the group decided to raft the Rio Tuiche, even though villagers warned it was impossible. Foolishly ignoring the advice, Fawcett and Costin were lucky to survive being drowned by the deadly series of waterfalls, whirlpools and canyons, as their *balsa* “shot through the air and crashed down into the black

⁹² Tomlinson, 168.

depths.”⁹³ It is clear that Fawcett was now in his element, following his own path once more and thriving of the danger of looking death in the eye, whether rafting or dodging arrows.

In Rurrenabaque for the last time, they came upon a woman suckling a litter of pigs at her breast, the true mother having been eaten by an anaconda. Fawcett remarked to himself that piglets are more important here than human babies. The three Englishmen cross the Plains of Mojos by ox cart, where Fawcett audaciously avoided the wrath of a wild bull, by “fixing him with an hypnotic eye”[235], and creeping to safety. It followed a sequence of impossibly narrow escapes Fawcett had enjoyed from the most terrifying beasts of the Amazon: vampire bats, anacondas, jaguars, crocodiles, the apazauca spider, and the bushmaster rattlesnake. Either this suggests the conceited exaggerations of travel lore, or reinforces the idea of a lucky star shining over the Colonel. In an exotic land of candiru fish, toothless sharks, double-nosed tiger hounds, and pink river dolphins, such encounters should not come as a surprise, although he may have overstated the immediate threat posed.



One of Brian Fawcett's illustrations for *Exploration Fawcett*

So it was that they arrived safely in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, via Santa Ana and the Rio Mamoré. Fawcett saw potential in the eastern capital, but was disappointed by the low morals, promiscuous women, and the babies left out to be eaten by pigs.⁹⁴ After Christmas in La Paz, Fawcett's plans were delayed by a bout of enteric fever. He felt “heartily ashamed”[245] to finally fall ill. With Todd gone, Fawcett and Manley moved north to the old mission of San Ignacio de Chiquitos, where the plains enter the jungle once more.

From the Guaporé, they sailed up the Rio Mequens, a remote area of unscarred rubber trees, inhabited only by a few foreign hermits and Indian tribes. On this lonely backwater, a somewhat legendary encounter occurred between Fawcett and the world-renowned Swedish anthropologist, ‘Baron’ Erland Nordenskiöld. In his memoirs, Nordenskiöld rather snootily recalls meeting the “capable but somewhat fantastical explorer Major Fawcett,”⁹⁵ and warning him against travelling amongst the cannibalistic tribes of the interior. For his part Fawcett thoughts were more taken

⁹³ Fawcett, 229. 70 years later, An Israeli Fawcett disciple came impossibly close to death on the same river. *Back From Tuiche*, by Yossi Ghinsberg, Random House NYC 1993 is a slightly cringing but rollocking account of his adventure.

⁹⁴ His thoughts are accurate. Santa Cruz is now the biggest and richest Bolivian City. His planned road scheme from Cochabamba to Santa Cruz was also adopted years later.

⁹⁵ Nordenskiöld, 308. Nordenskiöld belonged to the Royal Swedish Academy of Science

with the Swede's wife, Olga, an "attractive young lady ready to tramp forests and wade swamps together with her husband to meet distant tribes"[250].

After a three day trek, they came across a clearing with a naked Indian boy smashing stone in front of primitive huts as if "the curtain of time was drawn aside to reveal a glimpse of the distant past"[254]. Fawcett was perhaps the first white man to encounter the Maxubi tribe, whom, he beheld with utmost respect and admiration. In an era when the average person considered the native Amazonian Indian to be savage and subhuman, Fawcett's benevolent treatment and perception of the tribes he met was very enlightened. A newspaper article at the time of his first expedition lamented, "the Indian still exists and with him the barbarity and negligence of our civilisation," warning of danger to passers-by on route to the north-east.⁹⁶

Yet Fawcett often felt barbarism was a trait more applicable to the white man in the forest. He empathised with the Indians, lamenting the cruel way in which they were treated by rubber companies, atrocities which more than justified any retaliation. Indian villages, in contrast to the shabby white settlements, were well kept and organised. The image of the violent and depraved 'savage' no doubt was useful propaganda for rubber companies looking to create a reserve of labour.

As a hardy man himself, Fawcett paid homage to the stoicism of the Indian to adverse treatment, seeing one man avoiding infection by chopping his own arm off with a machete and sealing the stump in hot oil. Fawcett was not wholly immune to the imperial attitudes of the day, remarking "what the Indian feels mentally is anybody's guess"[128] yet at times his compassion for their degradation is quite moving.

Fawcett turned convention on its head by his friendly advances toward the forest Indians, showing up the ignorant superstition of many *caucheros*. He found the Echocas to have an abundance of food reserves, while the whites at a nearby *barraca* were dying of fever and starvation. Having digested scare stories, Fawcett soon learned to follow his own benevolent instincts towards the indigenous, taking adversities in his stride.

As with the Echocas, Fawcett found the Maxubis to be very generous, hospitable, and dignified people. A "robust fair people," Fawcett called those tribes who fled the waterways and the brutal grasp of rubber companies, superior to the "tame and docile" Indians of civilisation [126]. Other accounts share Fawcett's view of the affable nature of Amazonian Indians. Casement considered the Indians he saw to be "socialist by temperament and habit," and of superior development to their white oppressors.⁹⁷ Pinckard found a perfectly equal society, with "no interest in the accumulation of property or wealth.... not impelled by spirit of emulation."⁹⁸

Ever the modern thinker, Fawcett celebrated the natural medicines used by the indigenous Amazonians. Although he was frequently requested to use his own medical know-how, Fawcett devoutly subscribed to the curative powers of natural plant extracts. Time has proved correct his affirmation that western medicine could learn much from the study of such remedies.

⁹⁶ *El Diario* 18/9/06, 2.

⁹⁷ Taussig, 19.

⁹⁸ 57 Taussig. He quotes George Pinckard, an English traveller to the West Indies in 1816.

Fawcett regarded the encounter with the physically imposing and sophisticated Maxubis as further proof of a conviction he had been nurturing that might change forever the entomology of the continent.

In one village, they had seen an Indian boy with red hair and blue eyes. It is unlikely any European had previously been there, and far from being a genetic freak, Fawcett was convinced the boy was descended from a lost civilisation of superior white Indians. On his travels, Fawcett had collected similar accounts from several reliable eyewitnesses. A Frenchman, for instance, claimed he was “attacked by big, well-built, handsome savages, pure white, with red hair and blue eyes”[112].

For Fawcett, this all corroborated with a document he had unearthed from the National Library in Rio. It was an account of a gang of plundering Brazilian *Bandeiras*, who, in 1753, claimed to have discovered the ruins of a great and opulent city in the heart of the Brazilian Interior. They had caught a fleeting glance of two white men in a canoe, yet the expedition mysteriously disappeared after a messenger had taken a telegram back to the Viceroy of Bahia.⁹⁹

Fawcett researched the foremost voices of the day to put together his theory. From Lund he developed the idea that the Brazilian plateau was the site of Atlantis. From Short he inherited the hypothesis that the blue-eyed Toltecs had migrated south towards Brazil from Mexico. In addition he studied sources from missionaries and Spanish explorers from colonial times. Drawing on the tradition that the Incas were descendants of a great race to the east, Fawcett calculated it to be that of the Tapuyas. He told the Royal Geographical Society as early as 1911: “The Tapuyas are as fair as the English...refugees from an older and very great civilisation.”¹⁰⁰

In addition to this study, Fawcett felt he had acquired sufficient evidence from his travels into unfamiliar areas to justify his theory. Tribal *caciques* had given him artefacts, and told him of legendary Indian civilisations such as a magnificent city powered by “a secret of illumination unknown to us” [272]. Although many accounts seemed to be tinted with the inaccuracies of folklore, the nagging frequency with which stories seemed to crop up, plus a general geographical correspondence between them, proved too much for Fawcett to resist. The result of Fawcett’s research and investigation was a place called ‘Z’ – co-ordinates for the ‘Seven Cities’, supposed home of the great civilisation of the Tapuyas, in the unexplored hinterlands of the Brazilian Xingu. Fawcett told *Blackwood’s Magazine* to expect a discovery of ruins older even than the Egyptian Pyramids.¹⁰¹

A warning of the difficulty of such a task came when Fawcett had to flee a terrifying encounter with a group of Maricoxis, the cannibalistic war-like neighbours of the Maxubi. Fawcett retreated back to San Ignacio in September 1914 to discover that war had broken out in Europe. Back in Santa Cruz, tensions were evident between German and British residents. In Cochabamba, they found the Nordenskiolds also heading back to Europe. The Baron was shocked to see they had survived, and praised Fawcett’s findings.¹⁰² Eager to get home to fight, Fawcett returned via the Pacific, enlisting in January 191

⁹⁹ Callado, Anonio, *Esqueleto Na Lagoa Verde*, Rio. p3.

¹⁰⁰ <http://stangrist.com/fawcett.htm>

¹⁰¹ Callado, 29. The explorer Edwin Heath, in his *Peruvian Antiquities*, gave credence to Fawcett’s theory - www.wisdomworld.org/additional/ancientlandmarks/MysteryofMattoGrosso.html

¹⁰² Nordenskiold, 482. “In the River Mequens, Fawcett has discovered an important indigenous tribe that until now had never been visited by the white man. He classed them as Mashubi. They speak a different language to the Huari, but seem to have a similar material culture.”

PART TWO

1914 – 1925 AND BEYOND

7

THE FINAL CURTAIN

“If with all my experience, we can’t make it, there’s not much hope for others. The answer to the enigma of ancient South America may be found when those old cities are located and opened up to scientific research. That the cities exist, I know.....”[378]

Fawcett returned home from the Western Front greatly disillusioned. Writing in 1924, he described the post-war years as his “most wretched”[341]. He saw in Britain an empire in decline. Only in the Americas did Fawcett see hope, so he set about financing further expeditions in Brazil, and moved his family to California via Jamaica, hoping to educate his children in the “virile *ambiente*”[265] of the new world.

Fawcett was unable to elicit financial backing from the Royal Geographic Society’s conservative elite, whom, he added scornfully, would rather “play safe and back the good old Antarctic”[264]. He had more success with the Brazilian Government, which sought to open up the interior of the country. The 1920/21 expeditions in Matto Grosso and Gongugy ended in failure, a combination of bad company, floods and false leads leaving him no closer to his lost city.



Fawcett in 1921

Brian Fawcett recalls of his father, “from reticent, he became almost surly”[343], as Fawcett laboured at home in Devon making preparations for an expedition he viewed as his final chance. Jack Fawcett, now 21, was to accompany his father, along with family friend Raleigh Rimmel. A chip off the old block, Jack stood at six foot three inches, tough, handsome and physically fit, not to mention abstemious.

They planned to explore the inter-fluvial land between the Xingu and Araguaya Rivers, then head north along the Serra do Roncador. On reaching the Rio Sao Francisco they would head west toward the fabled city of the *Bandeiras*.

With the support of the North American Newspaper Alliance, the trio set out in 1925. Fawcett’s final dispatches expressed doubt concerning his own stamina, but demanded no rescue missions be sent for two years. On 25th June 1925 he wrote his wife, “you need have no fear of any failure”[363]. It was to be his last contact with the outside world.

All kinds of hypotheses emerged, ranging from starvation or murder, to more dubious theories that Fawcett had found a subterranean civilisation holding the key to immortality.♦

♦ *It is not the purpose of this study to explore the riddle of Fawcett’s disappearance. More information can be found in the appendix.*

8

A LIVING LEGEND

While many adventurers have embarked (and often disappeared) on trips into the Brazilian interior, hoping to find conclusive proof as to Fawcett's fate, relatively few have traced the Colonel's footsteps through Bolivia. Yet the latter activity is certainly a less hypothetical, and less futile exercise.

In 1954, German refugee Hans Ertl, once Hitler's personal photographer, discovered Cerro Paititi, a pre-Colombian hilltop city. Fawcett had apparently walked straight past it on the Mapiro Trail. The excavated site was 'rediscovered' by English explorer Sir John Blashford Snell in 2001. Historian Louis Demers claims it was a trading point between the highlands and lowlands in the Incan era. He believes many such jungle settlements once existed in the densely forested Caupolicán area, adding the contagious diseases of the Spanish had killed the populous *en masse*, and the ruins are yet to be discovered. Fawcett, of course, discovered no such ruins, and was in search of a living civilisation, yet he had always maintained that a great civilisation had existed here millennia before a similar vestige of culture in the Andes.



Much of Bolivia is even more remote now than it was in Fawcett's day

In 2001 a group of Lancastrian teachers were amazed to discover no-one had ever sought to prove Fawcett's claim that his adventures in the Ricardo Franco Hills formed the true inspiration for Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*. This honour has also been claimed by the Tepuis table mountain in Venezuela, and the vagueness of directions of Conan Doyle's adventurers fuelled the debate. Led by Simon Chapman F.R.G.S, they returned with '100% proof.'¹⁰³

¹⁰³ <http://Lostworld2001.com> charts their progress. Chapman had earlier published *The Monster of the Madidi* (Aurum Press 2001),

In the 1980s the plateau was home to a clandestine cocaine plant. Nowadays this remote and beautiful region that Fawcett had rhapsodised about - “No imagination could conjure up a vision to this reality”[154] – has been protected as Noel Kempff National Park. Few things have changed: the park is barely visited, and wildlife roam unafraid of human interference.

Until recently, Fawcett’s name had been gathering dust inside subchapters of various Bolivian history books. A renaissance has been led by an Argentine journalist –cum-explorer, Pablo Cingolani. Cingolani, an adopted *Paceño*, has completed two multipurpose expeditions with government backing into the Madidi/Caupolicán forests of north-west Bolivia. He led an 11 strong group of Bolivians and Argentines who deliberately recreated the route of Colonel Fawcett’s 1910/11 expeditions to the River Heath. They aimed to complete Fawcett’s work by reaching the absolute source of the Heath, and to bring medical supplies to isolated settlements. Their results were very interesting. Many regions opened up for the exploitation of rubber had since been reclaimed by the jungle. The San Carlos *barraca*, at which Fawcett had stayed, no longer existed. The trail was no longer usable by mules, so they had to carry everything by hand. Cingolani discovered Madidi to be a “*black hole* in the geography of the world where things have gone backwards,” and travel had actually become more difficult. The attempt to reach the Heath’s source at 2600 metres was called off due to injury, shipwreck and climatic reasons.¹⁰⁴

As in Fawcett’s day they found remote backwaters plagued by disease, and border conflicts. The populated Peruvian side shows signs of spilling onto the Bolivian side, threatening the precious Madidi National Park. *La Prensa* accused the Peruvian loggers and farmers of deliberate aggression and invasion,¹⁰⁵ but Cingolani dismisses this. He claims the lone border post erected by Fawcett has naturally worn away, so that no one knows where the border is anymore, highlighting the need for improved access and communication on the Bolivian side.

A side project of Cingolani’s, is an endeavour to find evidence of the alleged reappearance of the Toromona tribe. Villagers of San Fermin had reported the sight of two naked Indians, and various anthropologists recognise the possibility of the tribe, who had fled both the conquistadors and the *caucheros*, relocating to the immense, untouched hinterlands of the Madidi. The recent ‘revival’ of the Naua’s in Brazil, a tribe unseen since 1920, has lent validity to the view that the Toromonas are still in existence.¹⁰⁶ The story of a Norwegian agronomist, Larsen Hafsjkold, who went looking for “Bolivia’s ethnographic enigma”,¹⁰⁷ is eerily similar to that of Colonel Fawcett. In 1997, aged 37, the experienced and hardy Scandinavian, received a lift along the Rio Colorado, then set off alone with the promise of returning months later. Despite the efforts of Madidi Park Guards and a private detective, nothing has been heard of him since. Cingolani hopes to shed light on this mystery on his next

¹⁰⁴ Technician Pedro Aramayo was surprised Fawcett did not climb to the outright source, claiming it was “not technically difficult.” In 1996, the Heath Sonene Expedition reached the source.

¹⁰⁵ *La Prensa* 1/12/2001, 2a. – Claimed Hito 27 had been taken down. The government sent the army, claiming of invasion and Peruvians burning land and stealing tractors. Cingolani’s article in *El Pulso* (31/8/2001- 25-28) gives a more intelligent view.

¹⁰⁶ Cingolani & Laleos, 66/7. In 1920 disappearance/extinction announced by FUNAI of Naua Indias Brazil. in 2000, *La Nacion* of Buenos Aires, reported 250 to have reappeared.

¹⁰⁷ Cingolani & Laleos, 58. Quote from Alvaro Diez Astete

expedition, which will also attempt to locate ruins of an ancient city, San Jose de Paititi, and continue to encourage a public awareness of Bolivia's forgotten lands.

Cingolani's endeavours have been reflected by a renewed worldwide interest in Fawcett. Surviving daughter Joan Fawcett is notoriously protective of his estate. There have been negotiations over a possible Hollywood film. When financial backing is assured Misha Williams' play, "*AmaZonia*", will appear on stage in London. With full access to Fawcett's log books and letters, Williams promises dramatic new information that will, at last, truthfully explain the mystery of "this heaven sent story."

An Indiana Jones book has been written with Fawcett in mind,¹⁰⁸ plus there was a rerun of *Exploration Fawcett* by Phoenix Press in July 2001. Several interactive web sites retell and serialise his exploits, including the comprehensive *Great Web of Percy Harrison Fawcett* (www.phfawcettsworld.org), which has the ultimate goal of solving the ongoing mystery.

Even the Bolivian tourist industry is starting to realise Fawcett's market value. He appears in several travel guidebooks, and there are trails and campsites and waterfalls named in his honour. However, Fawcett remains a wayward hero for historians and foreign travellers, still unknown to the majority of Bolivians.

¹⁰⁸ *Indiana Jones and the Seven Veils* by Rob MacGregor, Bantam Books 1991. Here's a taste: "Fawcett's writing have turned up... Percy paints a tantalising picture of a lost city and a mythical red headed race who may be the descendents of ancient celtic druids. No-one leaves alive...."

CONCLUSIONS

“It is the misfortune of those daring spirits who conceive an idea too vast for their own generation to comprehend, or, at least, to attempt to carry out, that they pass for visionary dreamers.”¹⁰⁹

On reflection, 1914 was the pivotal moment in the life of Percy Harrison Fawcett. Having finally found his true niche in life, following his dream, the Great War robbed him of his prime years. Six years passed before he reclasped the baton of exploration, by now 53 years old, disillusioned by the devastating legacy of war in Europe, spiritually estranged from his homeland, and conscious that time was running out. Although Fawcett’s wartime experiences will not be fully illuminated until his correspondence has been released, the story after 1918 is a sad one. The Lost City became such an obsession that he began to lose perspective. He even hallucinated an Indian encampment. Having once expressed homesickness, he neglected his family more than ever, and knowing the phenomenal risks involved in the final expedition, Fawcett essentially led his son, Jack, into a death trap.¹¹⁰ It is for these years that the world remembers Colonel Fawcett. Few of his contemporaries forget to mention his self-belief, courage and powers of endurance. Nordenskiöld recalls “an extremely original man, absolutely fearless but of boundless imagination,”¹¹¹ Fleming “a rare combination of the mystic and the man of action.”¹¹² Benedict Allen recently called him the “Livingstone of the Amazon.” But then there are those who feel “his legend has been overblown.”¹¹³ Neil Whitehead and Benedict Allen both claim he is famous for disappearance rather than having achieved anything. It was an age when the daring exploits of men from all walks of life - bandits, geologists, missionaries, capitalists – showed “our fuss over authentic explorers to be a little overdone.”¹¹⁴

Fawcett’s motives remain as mysterious as his disappearance. Callado calls him a “typical empire builder.”¹¹⁵ Was he chasing fame and glory, or did he wish to forsake civilisation for the simple? Could Joseph Conrad’s verdict on Casement that “there is a touch of the conquistador in him,”¹¹⁶ apply to Fawcett? It is perhaps self-defeating to speculate. This study is not concerned with what he might have done, but what he *did* do. Fawcett’s greatest achievements, which have largely been forgotten, came in Bolivia before 1914.

¹⁰⁹ Prescott, William H., *History of the Conquest of Peru*, Random House, New York 1998. p205. Fawcett would have read these very words before reaching South America

¹¹⁰ He seemed to count on unfailing support and understanding from his wife, however. He expressed immense regret at the fact that only 10 of 24 years of married life were spent together.

¹¹¹ www.phfawcettsworld.org Taken from Swedish Newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*.

¹¹² Fleming, 20.

¹¹³ Demers suggests that the Indians had simply lied about the whereabouts of ‘lost cities’ to Fawcett to get rid of him, in much the same way that some of their ancestors had done with gold hungry Spaniards

¹¹⁴ Tomlinson, 168

¹¹⁵ Callado, 27.

¹¹⁶ Taussig, 11.



An ageing Colonel Fawcett

He is credited in Bolivian textbooks for his valuable contributions to the mappings, surveys and knowledge of the countries' waterways and hinterlands, and its inhabitants.¹¹⁷ Fawcett saw potential in Bolivia and was happy to lend his expertise to help without expecting reward. In this, for a contemporary foreigner, he is almost unique. The Royal Geographical Society recognised his contributions with a Founders Gold Medal in 1916, marking Fawcett as one of the foremost explorers/geographers of his generation. On April 22nd 1929, in his annual address, RGS President Sir Charles Close deplored the loss of “an adventurous explorer and distinguished geographer whose end will be mourned by all of us.” Notoriously scornful of authority, Fawcett would have allowed himself an ironic smile at this accolade from “the incredulous folk who sit at home and think they know all that is to be known about the world.”¹¹⁸

One Bolivian source claimed Fawcett did not always reciprocate the “extreme deference” shown to him, never “concealing his contempt for Bolivia, her authority and her military.”¹¹⁹ Fawcett is also criticised for his insulting description of the civilised Indian *Cholos* of La Paz.¹²⁰ Considering the contexts of the time and the atrocities dealt out by white Bolivians this seems unjustified. Fawcett was certainly enlightened amongst his contemporaries, prepared to learn the language and culture of his hosts, and use their food and medicine. He respected the “true nobility of the poor villagers”[207] in giving all they had, and loved the friendly, hospitable and witty South Americans.

Bolivia also introduced Fawcett to the mysteries of the Amazon, the weirdly alluring green hell that would seduce him into a slow, fatal descent. As Adrian Cowell remarks,

The Amazon has been the Peter Pan land of the grown up world. Men who enter it acquire strange ideas and visions and the explanations of travellers are always suspect as the embroidered means of self-deception.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ In Frontaura Argandoña, Manuel, *Enciclopedia Boliviana: Descubridores y Exploradores de Bolivia*, Los Amigos del Libro, La Paz 1971. pp139-140, and Zeitum Lopez, Said, *Amazonia Boliviana*, La Paz 1991, [289].

¹¹⁸ www.phfawcettweb.org – Quote from 1911 lecture. The RGS had refused to fund his explorations.

¹¹⁹ Frontaura Argandoña, 140.

¹²⁰ “The *Cholos* are viscous and invertibrate specimens of humanity, by no means physically or mentally up to the standard of their womenkind.” [50]

¹²¹ Cowell, 17.

What is most remarkable is that Fawcett actually felt *at home* in the solitude of the forest. Most travellers tend to cry at the unimaginable physical abuse the Amazon imparts from all manner of malignant creatures and relentlessly inhospitable surroundings. Not only this, but also the psychological terror; a sense of danger, bewilderment, and paranoia – “the horror of the unseen.”¹²² Fawcett appeared immune to all these horrors, and even preferred to go alone.



Fawcett thrived in the solitude of Amazonia

Bolivia is also the main setting for *Exploration Fawcett*, the unfinished memoir completed and popularised by his son, which is perhaps his greatest legacy, “striking for their contrast of visionary dreams and earthy rankness”.¹²³ Fawcett always intended for it to be read as travelogue rather than science, and it survives as a testament of this “counter-narrative of the rediscovery of marvel that echoes the earliest travel writing on South America. . . . A search for some last hidden tokens of its former wild savagery and exoticism.”¹²⁴

It is also a wonderfully enthralling and informative document of social history. In Bolivian Amazonia, he profiled a world that largely no longer exists. A tour of the region at present reveals abandoned buildings and ruins swallowed by the jungle, ghostly relics of mankind’s transient endeavours.

Above all, it is Fawcett’s character that transfixes the reader. His unique personality oozes off every page, his dry, understated humour and his natural gift for narration and storytelling. Tomlinson’s praise of the earliest accounts of adventure in the Amazon is also highly applicable to Fawcett:

“We borrow the light of an observant and imaginative traveller. . . . and think it is the country which shines.”¹²⁵

It is for this, his daring and the passion of his beliefs, that Colonel Fawcett continues to inspire.

¹²² Taussig, 78. Quote from Captain Whiffen.

¹²³ *Fortean Times* issue 99 June 1997. Loren Coleman, *Longing to Find A Giant Anaconda*.

¹²⁴ Whitehead, Neil L, *The Forest of Marvels – Travel Writing on Amazonia 1500-2000*, in Hulme, Peter & Youngs, Tim, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, CUP 2002. p10.

¹²⁵ Tomlinson, 82.

APPENDIX

SOLVING THE MYSTERY:

Several sightings of Colonel Fawcett and Jack Fawcett were reported after 1925, but none were or have since been substantiated. Captivated by the mystery, adventurers today are still braving the hostile conditions of the Xingu forest searching for clues. In 1996, 12 members of an expedition were taken hostage and robbed of \$60,000 worth of equipment by Kalapalo Indians. As Peter Fleming put it, “enough legend has grown up around the subject to form a new and separate branch of folk-lore.” Did Fawcett starve? Had savages killed him? Had he gone mad and lost his memory? Was he held captive? Had he lost himself on purpose?

Nina Fawcett claimed to have had telepathic communication with her husband as late as 1938. Atlantis, flying saucer and hollow earth theorists have since seized Fawcett’s tale, claiming he had found an underground civilisation holding the key to immortality. Whether Colonel Fawcett is still alive and kicking at 135 or whether he drowned unceremoniously in 1925, it remains, and will most likely continue to remain, uncertain. A short list of those who attempted to solve the mystery follows:

Exploration Fawcett –

Brian Fawcett covers the major developments through alleged sightings, relief expeditions and search parties between 1925-1954 in his Epilogue.

Dyott, George M. On the Trail of the Unknown, (GP Putnam's Sons 1926)

Account of the first official search party.

Fleming Peter, Brazilian Adventure

Well-publicised 1933 expedition who hoped to complete Dyott’s mission.

Churchward, Robert, Wilderness of Fools: An account of the Adventures in Search of Lt. Col. P.H. Fawcett (Routledge 1936)

Callado, Anonio Esqueleto Na Lagoa Verde, Rio

Account from a member of Orlando Villa Boas’ expedition in 1950’s who claimed to have found the ‘bones’ of Colonel Fawcett

Cowell Adrian, The Heart of the Forest, Victor Gollancz Ltd London 1960 -

English expedition member who also worked with Villa Boas.

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