Book Review

The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon

David Grann
Doubleday, 2005, 2009

Reviewed by
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IN 1947 J. K. WRIGHT wrote an epitaph for the explorer. Aerial photography and reconnaissance mapping during World War II had eliminated the world's remaining *terrae incognitae*. Silenced forever were the "Sirens' voices" that had lured explorers away from their homes in search of the land of Gog and Magog, the kingdom of Prester John, and (in more modern times) to transport heavy survey and other scientific equipment over mountains and across deserts into the areas their maps labeled "Unexplored" (1).

David Grann's *The Lost City of Z*, a work of literary journalism, takes us to the early 1900s when the Sirens' final, irresistible song still fired travelers' imaginations. The focus was the Amazon region. Roughly the size of Europe, the Amazon contained vast reaches of land that had never been mapped or reconnoitered by outsiders. Beyond the frontier settlements and cruelly managed rubber plantations, and away from immediate shores of well-traveled waterways, immense sections of the Amazon remained an explorer's paradise.

Into this paradise (or "green hell," as many who went there came to feel) Grann follows one of the last great geographers of the Victorian age, Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett. Actually a Lt. Colonel who inflated his rank to impress potential sponsors, and a geographer by virtue of his relatively brief training at the Royal Geographic Society, Fawcett represented that breed of amateur, all-around scientist-explorer that was itself doomed to perish not only as *terrae incognitae* disappeared, but as modern scientific specializations proliferated. Fawcett's increasing obsolescence (and eccentricity, as he began to dabble in the occult) eventually made him an embarrassment to the same RGS that had once pinned a Founder's Medal to his chest. To

make matters worse, Fawcett was not one of those rich, idle gentlemen who had traditionally swelled the ranks of the RGS and who were now being marginalized by the society's professionalization. Fawcett did not have money. In his fifties, and still trying to find sponsors for a major expedition to Bolivia, Fawcett could no longer scrape up the cash to pay his RGS dues. His decline in scientific standing, as teams of better-trained and -equipped specialists entered the Amazon, is a moving subtheme.

But things were not always so bleak. Billed as "the Livingstone of the Amazon" (107) by the RGS when he was still its darling, Fawcett made several treks into the region from the 1900s to the 1920s that captivated the world. Grann is at his best while depicting the suffering endured by the members of these expeditions under Fawcett, who was a martinet once civilization had been left behind. While diseases and insects literally drove his men insane or ate them alive, Fawcett diligently mapped and measured and ordered everyone to march faster. Seemingly impervious to disease himself, Fawcett also held up in the jungle by drawing on a combination of his Victorian tendency to self-abnegation (heightened to near masochism), his RGS schooling, and his previous military experiences in Ceylon. Also important were "How-to" books he brought into the field, such as Francis Galton's *Hints to Travellers*. This explained how to make and record observations, and also offered sobering "hints" for survival. For instance, if bitten by a poisonous snake, one is to ignite gunpowder in the wound and then burn the area "with the end of your iron ramrod, heated as near a white heat as you can readily get"; if an arrow punctures an artery, one should "Pour boiling grease into the wound"; and so on. Because it so vividly evokes the conditions of (and presumptions underwriting) such explorations, the book is worth quoting, via Grann, again. Thus it recommends that when taking a captive, you should "...take your knife, put it between your teeth, and, standing over [your prisoner], take the caps off your gun, and lay it down by your side. Then handcuff him, in whatever way you best can. The reason of setting to work this way is, that a quick supple savage, while you are fumbling with your strings, and bothered with a loaded gun, might easily spring round and seize hold of it, and quite turn the tables against you" (64). It must be noted, however, that Fawcett himself strove to avoid getting into conflicts with natives. In a lecture published in *The Geographical Journal* (1910), he blames the cruelty of the rubber barons for turning once-friendly tribes into hostile ones. This, of course, made his own work more risky. According to witnesses, Fawcett could usually make peace with groups of natives he encountered by

raising his hands into the air and walking toward them—once into a hail of arrows—while members of his party sang behind him.

And what of “Z,” the lost city? Like others, Fawcett believed that the Amazon rainforest hid the ruins of an ancient, complex civilization that had not yet been discovered. He compiled evidence and kept notes in code, and using false coordinates, to prevent anyone from stealing a discovery. Grann suggests that Fawcett’s interest in “Z” escalated after World War I, which the Lt. Colonel witnessed from the front. The war may have unhinged Fawcett from Western culture somewhat. Seeking new sources of meaning, he turned to the occult teachings of Madame Blavatsky and, simultaneously, to a renewed interest in “Z.” Fawcett ultimately sacrificed his life to the dream of discovering “Z.” He vanished in the jungle, along with his son and his son’s friend, while searching for the city on an expedition funded by John D. Rockefeller in 1925. That he disappeared in the midst of “Z” itself, the buried remnants of an ancient network of sophisticated urban settlements, which he could not have recognized in his time, is the ironic conclusion.

Finally, the reviewing part of this review. As bedtime reading, *The Lost City* is better than it needs to be to get a thumbs-up from me. If you like true adventures with geographic themes and huge portions of hardship and suffering (Lawrence Bergreen’s *Over the Edge of the World* [2003], Alfred Lansing’s *Endurance* [1999], Jon Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air* [1998], etc.), this will be your cup of tea. However, it does have flaws. The main weakness is that Grann sets up his own exploration, intending to follow in Fawcett’s footsteps and possibly find out what happened to him. The story of the pudgy, New York-based writer preparing his expedition (he uses Google Earth to eyeball his destination, weathers his television-producer wife’s incredulity, buys high-tech gadgetry at a camping store without knowing how to use it, etc.) cross-cuts the more gripping material about Fawcett himself and weakens the whole. Fortunately, these are relatively short interludes.

Fawcett, P. H. 1910. Explorations in Bolivia. *The Geographical Journal* 35(5):513–529.

Wright, John K. 1947. Terrae Incognitae: The Place of the Imagination in Geography. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 37(1):1–15.