

## TLC Showcase

# Adam Courtenay



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## Introduction to *Amazon Men*

There comes a time in the affairs of all journalists when writing about the things that will inevitably become yesterday's forgotten fragments loses its sheen. If something you write today is consigned to the dustbin tomorrow, then what is the point?

Journalism is about engaging people's passing interest rather than encouraging reflection. A book is about putting your thoughts, views and ideas upon a specific topic which you hope will escape the corrosive effects of time and have a more lasting effect on people's consciousness.

Writing *Amazon Men* has been about writing about men of a timeless mode. The people who have contributed to our understanding of the world's greatest biome have always been with us – they are not disengaged historical characters. I like to think of them as the kinds of people you might meet today, just placed in different time zones. It's written in the third person, but thought through as if it was in the first, and I do hope this shines through the text.

The inspiration comes from several sources. First, I have always enjoyed the idea of epic journeys and have followed some of them (with varying success!) myself. Secondly, I have always felt that South America has remained a largely unknown province for European and American readers. We know nothing about it other than the legendary exploits of Pizarro and Cortes. As for the Amazon, it has been given even shorter shrift. *Amazon Men* is a combination of my reverence for explorers and a keen desire to inform about an area that deserves far greater attention and recognition.

I remain profoundly thankful to The Literary Consultancy for taking an interest in the book. As an Australian I always knew a history of the Amazon was never going to excite too much local interest. I blundered about with a few half-interested agents in both the UK and the USA, until TLC came through with excellent feedback and a promise of directing it to the right people. The help I have received from TLC has been beyond the call of duty and given me enormous encouragement in the desire to get this book placed into the public sphere.

## Extract from *Amazon Men*

By Adam Courtenay

*“But that was the trouble with all the plans to create a kingdom in El Dorado country. They always almost worked.”*

- *Patrick Tierney, Darkness in El Dorado*

It was once said that one of the major components of any journey into the unknown is that it starts with the imagination. Exploratory ventures of any kind are often tainted by false and sometimes fantastic expectations, their objectives based on the imagined content of the lands to be explored.

Finding a lost realm in the Amazon was the sixteenth century’s version of finding Nirvana. The search for El Dorado, a city said to be dripping in gold, was every conquistador’s most fervent desire, but it was only the first of many. Throughout history, people have persisted in projecting their own fantasies and notions onto this Edenic landscape.

Nelson Rockefeller believed that the Amazon should be divided into canals for shipping lanes while Elizabeth Nietzsche, sister of the philosopher Friedrich, thought a master race of pure Aryans could only be begat and nurtured in a virgin wilderness. She set up *Nueva Germania* but the Germans-only colony could not support itself and was eventually overwhelmed by the rainforest. Percy Fawcett, the British explorer of the early twentieth century, spent years seeking the ruins of a great city in the wilderness, supposedly ruled by a technologically advanced civilisation. He died in the attempt.

Fantasy has ruled men’s thinking about the Amazon for hundreds of years. Even Teddy Roosevelt, the ex-American president and one of the prime movers behind

the Panama Canal's construction, had visions of "big manufacturing communities" knit by railroads from the Andes to the Atlantic. This was the capitalist dream. The Amazon, he mused, would be the perfect site for an industrial park where the force of rapids and waterfalls "could drive electric trolleys up and down its whole length and far out on either side" <sup>1</sup>

The fantasies changed with the needs of the time, but they persisted. They were just as potent whether coming from sixteenth century warriors or twentieth century industrialists. So many of those who cast their eyes over this great green expanse made this mistake. The Amazon was a projection of their ideals well before it was realised geography.

For most of the past five centuries, the Amazon has been categorised in two ways: those who saw it as a green cathedral and those who saw it as a green hell. For those who considered it as a kind of hell, it had to be transformed in some way; for those who saw it as a green cathedral, it was to be honoured, preserved and nurtured.

Although the vast forest, with its endless cacophony of exotic animal and bird sounds, was hell on earth to some, it was an exotic and hitherto unexplored paradise to others. Its swarming insects and fearsome predators such as the puma, crocodile and anaconda turned Europe's bravest warriors (and countless others) into quivering wrecks, but they were like gold nuggets to the nineteenth century naturalists. The Native Americans feared and loathed by conquistadors and settlers were like Adam and Eve before the Fall to anthropologists and humanists. One man's hell was another man's wonder.

Many of the same wondrous animals so beautifully adapted and sculpted by evolution became the source of inspiration to scientists and a wonder to the public. Europeans marvelled at the boat-loads of outlandish flora and fauna sent home from the Amazon by the adventurous men of the Enlightenment. For them, there was greatness in everything they saw. It was intrinsic to the forest – there was no need

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<sup>1</sup> Slater, Candace, *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon*, University Of California Press (2002) page 46

for new visions, the Amazon was nature as perfection.

For those who saw it as a green hell, one theme resonated over time. The river and its forest were a sham and a counterfeit – in its natural state it promised so much and delivered so little. Ergo, it must be converted into something profitable and worthwhile, not left in a state of Arcadian virtue.

How did these two completely antithetical modes of thinking come into being? Heaven needed no explanation – it was there to be seen, touched and felt. Hell was far more complex. It was the word people used to describe their own unsatisfied expectations, the fantasies that came to nothing, the promises that led nowhere. It was the place where they could not receive the bounty they felt they were entitled to, which they could not mould into the forms that they desired. It's why the conquistadors pronounced the Amazon an enemy of God. Variations on this theme continued over the ages – in latter days the jungle was recast in the role of enemy of progress.

If such feelings of “betrayal” can be traced by history, then we should start with the first attempted conquest of the Amazon jungle. In 1542, Spanish conquistadors travelled east from the Peruvian colony of Quito, over the high range of its active volcanoes, across its high passes and wild stony uplands to seek out the land of the Golden Prince.

All they had was their mortal strength, the bite of their steel and matchlock, and an unbreakable faith in God. East of Peru was designated nowhere land, simply the next frontier after a series of uninterrupted conquests. Mankind in predatory mode cannot help itself: it will not suffer voids.

Since they had arrived on the American continent, these same men had been victorious on all fields of battle. They had taken over the grassy plains of Venezuela and had overthrown the Incas of Peru and the Aztecs of Mexico. In less than 30 years the entire Caribbean was in their hands. The Spanish held sway over landmasses we now know as Mexico, Florida and California. They had advanced deep into the top half of the South American continent and by the 1540s were moving southwards into

present-day Chile.

In 1542, they travelled east from the Peruvian colony of Quito towards a range of dangerously active volcanoes. They swept past high passes and wild, stony uplands. Ever in search of wealth and space, God's chosen warriors descended Olympian-like from the Andean heights, marching down the flanks of the mountains towards the tropical lowlands. From their lofty perches, the forest they beheld must have been immense beyond any preconceptions, yet they plunged in, fully assured that their creator had granted them dominion over all. How could God's soldiers ever fail?

Once they entered the forest, the conquistadors could have been forgiven for thinking they were bounded by a garden of super-abundance. They looked upon the lushness of this forest with awe. There they found soaring giants of trees with buttress roots tall enough to hide a man and stems almost a metre across the buttresses. They cut tenuous trails through the undergrowth but rarely found a lighted glade. At night they flapped their hands across their faces and saw nothing, yet all around were the unceasing howls, cries, whistles and general cacophony of unseen jungle denizens.

They would have seen liana vines weaving thick cords that never touch the soil, contending with the trees themselves to seek out the sunlight. There are strangling plants that first embrace and then slowly squeeze the essence from the very trees which kept them aloft. These are the matador vines, which, legend has it, flower in triumph when they have completely killed their host.

The army led by Gonzalo Pizarro, half-brother to the Inca destroyer Francisco, doggedly pursued their goal – down the next ridge, through the next valley, they were convinced they were on the path to El Dorado, a city where wealth was believed to be so preposterously plentiful its prince regularly powdered himself with gold talc.

What they found was a jungle so dense and unyielding that it took them days to progress a few hundred yards, energy dripping from their bodies as they slashed through the undergrowth in insufferable heat and humidity. As a chronicler of the

time, Cieza De Leon said, it was quite simply “the most laborious expedition that had ever been undertaken in the Indies”.<sup>2</sup>

They were beset by swarms of tiny creatures which sucked their blood and drank their sweat insatiably, bit and poisoned their flesh while they slept and sought out cavities in their bodies to lay eggs and culture disease. Rendered half-crazed by their new surroundings and unable to sustain themselves, they watched while the native peoples slipped gracefully through the stinging and strangling undergrowth with perfect ease and in excellent health. Here was the paradox. The very people they had dominated with contemptuous ease in every other theatre on this new continent, were their clear superiors in the Amazon.

The Spanish were the first in a long line to feel cheated. The country of their collective imagination was nowhere to be seen. Where was the gold that they felt sure was promised to them? Why couldn't they find enough food to eat in this seemingly most fertile of lands? Why were the natives so well adapted and immune from a hostile environment that so afflicted them? They had come across the iron cruelty of the tropics, where the law of God had no place. It was supplanted by the law of the jungle, a place entirely indifferent to good and evil, which worked out its own ends without regard for the needs of God or men. As the great naturalist Charles Darwin said of the rainforest: “The land is one great, wild, untidy, luxuriant hothouse, made by nature for herself.”

The Spanish learnt nothing from their first disastrous foray. Common sense was telling them this was not going to be a part of their universe, but to the heirs of Columbus, this was unconscionable. Worse, the ungodly heathens, those who had never known the one true God, were its masters. Again, to the most outstanding race of the sixteenth century, this was intolerable.

They pressed on, believing that El Dorado was theirs for the taking. In 1560 another army of Spain's finest set forth down the river to find it, but disillusionment soon set in. En route, the expedition deteriorated into a tin-pot rebellion to take over Peru led

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<sup>2</sup> Pedro Cieza de Leon –*War of Chupas*, Hakluyt Society London (1918) pages 55-56

by the psychopathic conquistador, Lope de Aguirre. In this case the river seemed to bring on a strange new condition. With dreams of gold and conquest unsatisfied, the journey devolved – in one writer’s words – into “the wildest, most romantic, most desperate and most appalling in the annals of Spanish enterprises... culminating in one wild orgie [sic] of madness and blood”.<sup>3</sup>

Aguirre, who is said to have declared himself the “wrath of God”, was crystal clear about one aspect of the trip: the Amazon was just too hard. “God only knows how we ever escaped out of that fearful lake,” he wrote to his king, Philip II. “I advise thee not to send any Spanish fleet up this ill-omened river; for, on the faith of a Christian, I swear to thee, O king and lord, that if a hundred thousand men should go up, not one would escape, and there is nothing else to expect, especially for the adventurers from Spain.”<sup>4</sup> If the forest was their enemy, it was therefore branded an enemy of God.

After the conquistadors came the very first settlers. They set about slashing, burning and clearing the forest to sow fields of manioc and maize. What they grew barely sustained them. The crops were weak and within a few seasons did not grow at all. Where was the expected bounty? How could a forest give rise to such a riot of vegetation and not support a few acres of subsistence crops? Here was a new paradox. The forest was a counterfeit and a cheat.

These intrepid pioneers into the forest had no way of knowing that the answer lay beneath the soil, where an intricately woven mass of white threads sits just below the surface. This matt of fungi is directly linked with the roots of trees, sending much-needed nutrients skywards as soon as they hit the ground. A true tropical rainforest, unlike its temperate zone counterpart, has no soft bed of loamy rich soil fed by layer upon layer of decaying deciduous leaf litter. Everything that falls to the ground – faeces, rotting fruit, seeds or leaves – is quickly consumed by a primeval

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<sup>3</sup> Fray Pedro Simon, *The expedition of Pedro de Ursua and Lope de Aguirre*, translated by William Bollaert. From the introduction by Clements Markham, page xi

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 189



fungus, directly attached to lace-like networks of root hairs, and perfectly adapted to the hot and wet conditions. A soil sends back to the trees all the nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium and retains nothing for itself. What the soil gives, the trees greedily take away.

The history of this early exploration and settlement of the Amazon is filled with those who acted on mistaken ideas and false beliefs. The conquistadors had been sorely disabused of their fantasies. They had expected heaven, only to find hell. The settlers had sought to be provided for only to find barrenness. There was a sense of having been cheated, a feeling that if only they could prise it open, prosperity would surely follow. For the next four hundred years, men of all kinds would pressure the forest to bow to their needs and desires. Few appreciated or dealt with the forest as it was.

If the forest was a sham, if it killed crops and attacked people and if it failed to deliver the gold men were sure was there or the profitable enterprises they dreamed of creating, then it never seemed to occur to the complainant that the only sham was one of their own making. It was never in the forest, it was in the egos and preconceptions the intruders superimposed upon it.

While the thwarted conquistadors proclaimed the jungle an enemy of God, later industrialists looked upon the jungle as an enemy of progress. The God of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was Mammon, the god of profit. Industrialists of this era eyed this great patch of green wilderness and saw a great, green void. They equated the Amazon's seemingly unlimited space with unlimited potential. Filling the void with a confected ideal was the same reason that brought their armour-suited sixteenth century counterparts clanking into the unknown. There was nothing here worth preserving, they decided. It needed a new vision, one that suited their present needs.

Percival Farquhar, one of the most successful international financiers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was perhaps the perfect representative of this ideal, who believed the American dream could be transplanted into the thick of the jungle. In 1907 he assumed control of the Madeira-Mamore railway, the first

ever railroad in the Amazon, which had been plagued with problems since construction had begun 35 years earlier.

The railway's objective was to transport rubber from the backwoods of Bolivia to the navigable stretches of the Amazon's largest southern tributary, the Rio Madeira. It has often been described as the first great contest between the Amazon and modern industry. Farquhar was the man who eventually finished the job, but did he win the contest?

Farquhar's dream to transport rubber efficiently across some of the Amazon's thickest and toughest terrain expended more lives than any other project in modern industrial history...save one. The Thai-Burma railway, built by Allied prisoners of war during the Second World War under obscene conditions, cost the lives of 16,000 men. The death roll of the Madeira-Mamore, a purely commercial venture sanctioned by the governments of Brazil and Bolivia, has never been officially established, but historians believe it took with it between 7000 and 10,000 men in the making – roughly one death for every railway sleeper.

It was famous enough in its day to earn itself two nicknames. The first was 'Mad Maria', a description coined by the Americans who worked on it, in deference to its pointlessness. When the line was finally finished 40 years after inception, a Chicago newspaper noted dryly that the Madeira-Mamore Railway had been completed. "It was ...one of the most remarkable railroads ever constructed ... from nowhere to nowhere." The second nickname was far more direct: 'Railroad of the Dead'.

The project had all the hallmarks of the Panama Canal which had had similar "stop-start" problems over several decades. Both projects shared a credo common to development projects of this era – progress should not be stopped merely on the basis that people were dying in huge numbers.

The British journalist H.M Tomlinson visited the railroad in 1910 and was one of the first to report on what was already turning into a modern tragedy. From Porto Velho the track moved rapidly into "darkness", as if a black hole had been dug out of the forest to suck men in. Periodically men were spat out "bearded like Crusoe" and

“pallid as anaemic women”. They were speckled throughout with insect bites. “These men said that where they had been working the sun never shone,” Tomlinson wrote. “For its light was stopped on the unbroken green which, except where the big rivers flowed, roofed the whole land.”<sup>5</sup>

The construction gangs were initially made up mostly of Europeans and Americans, but as foreign labour became increasingly scarce, more South Americans were hired. Termites ate the workers’ clothes and ticks and blowflies of all descriptions left them covered with welts and infections. The sweat bees were so unshakeable that an engineer would sometimes have to assign two men to swat them away from their eyes, just to be able to carry out his surveying.

As Tomlinson wrote:

“Mostly there were skin troubles. The least abrasion in the tropics may spread to a horrid and persistent wound. In one case a vampire bat had punctured a man’s arm near his elbow while he slept, and that little wound had grown disastrously. We were in a region where the *pium* flies swarmed, tiny black flies which alight on the hand and face, perhaps a dozen at a time and gorge themselves. Even these minute wounds were liable to become deep and bad.”<sup>6</sup>

Often men were cut off by floods and reduced to eating parrots and monkeys. Beri beri, a disease associated with malnutrition and deficiency in Vitamin B1, caused the death of many workers, but the primary killers were yellow fever and malaria, followed closely by amoebic dysentery and typhoid.

The turnover of manpower, at 95 per cent every three months, was horrendous. If they weren’t dying, they were fleeing. There were stories of men taking their chances in the forest and never being heard of again. A German posse left en masse and their heads were later found on sticks, not far from the line. Farquhar knew that he needed a workforce of about 2700, but because of constant manpower attrition

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<sup>5</sup> Tomlinson, H.M – *The Sea and the Jungle* (1912) Penguin reprint (1985), page 227

<sup>6</sup> Ibid page 234

he had to recruit 8500 a men a year. Workers knew what they were getting into, but they were prepared to risk their lives for Farquhar's attractive rates of pay. He offered unskilled workmen the then unthinkable rate of \$3 a day.

Finally, in April 1912, it was completed. That was the last moment of glory. In 1913, the bottom fell out of the rubber market. The East Asian producers had been steadily increasing output in the first years of the new century. By 1913 they had reached such economies of scale that their plantations could produce rubber at a quarter of the cost of their Brazilian counterparts. Brazil's share of the world rubber market plummeted from more than 85 per cent in 1910 to less than one-third by 1915. The railway was abandoned soon after. Farquhar's only real achievement was to have turned tropical hell into a tropical holocaust - and then abandon it as a write-off.

Like the conquistadors of old, American industrialists believed their dream could be planted in pastures new and like their sixteenth century predecessors, they tried again with the same imperious self-belief. After Farquhar there were other pharaonic-like attempts to alter the Amazon. In 1927 Henry Ford would build Fordlandia, a 2.5 million acre rubber plantation designed to provide his motor company with its own source of cheap raw material. After 18 years it was abandoned. Ford had not counted on the diseases and pests that would decimate his crop. In 1967 the shipping magnate Daniel K. Ludwig purchased over three million acres of land to build a forestry products company, trying to cultivating a Nigerian wonder tree known as 'Gmelina'. This project also failed, but not until Ludwig had more than one billion dollars into the scheme. Like the settlers who first arrived on the scene, he overestimated the potential of the weak Amazonian soil.

Early colonisers were the first to proclaim the falsity of this land, but nobody who followed seemed prepared to learn the more subtle ways in which Indians harvested the forest. They assured themselves that the primitiveness of the native forest dwellers was based either on laziness or lack of intellect. None of these foreign aspirants ever thought of using local expertise. They brought in men and materiel from offshore, convinced that American know-how and "can do" would always win the day.

The Amazon had proved that the seeds of the American dream simply could not be sown there, not even by America's most powerful industrialists. The dream quite simply refused to be transplanted.

## About the Writer

**Adam Courtenay**, 49, studied Literature and Languages at Sydney University before embarking on a career as a journalist for Australia's only national newspaper, *The Australian*. In 1989 he moved to London and stayed for 14 years, working as a writer and editor for various *Financial Times* Magazines, a columnist for *The Sunday Times* and as a production editor at the *Financial Times*.



He is a keen walker and hiker. In 1999 he followed Hannibal's footsteps to the Italian border and the next year followed this up with a walk from Salzburg to Vienna in homage to the legendary travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermour. In 2005, he completed the gruelling Kokoda track in Papua New Guinea - scene of great battles between the Australians and the Japanese in WWII. In 2009 he walked the Aboriginal 'dreamtime' walkabout in central Australia, the Larapinta Trail.

Adam writes regularly for *The Australian Financial Review* and is Australian business correspondent for *The Abu Dhabi National*.

His first book: *Amazon – First Contact* is to be published by Hampress in October.