

Lt. Colonel Fawcett and the Search for 'Z'

Percy Harrison Fawcett was born in Higher Erith Road, Torquay, on the 31st August 1867. His parents whom he described as '*devoid of affection*' sent him to be educated at Newton College in Newton Abbott. He went on to Woolwich as a cadet, and in 1880 joined the Royal Artillery eventually reaching the rank of Lt. Colonel.

As a young man he was a formidable figure, 6' 1½" tall, 200 lbs and a first class athlete, cricketer and boxer with an obsession about physical fitness. His great physical strength was coupled with an iron will, courage, (for which he won the D.S.O in the Great War on the Western Front), and an amazing constitution that made him seemingly immune to tropical diseases. Sickness was and still is the bane of South American exploration but Fawcett was only ill once during all his expeditions, he recorded in his diary '*I was heartily ashamed of myself.*' Unfortunately his expeditions were often crippled by the illness and inadequacies of others.

Fawcett began his travelling with the Royal Garrison Artillery with whom he served all over the world. Upon his retirement in 1910 he began his exploration work, starting with several survey missions for the Royal Geographical Society mapping the borders of Bolivia (for this work he received the Royal Geographical Society's Founders gold medal in 1916). On these travels through the South American jungle the locals and returning explorers recounted stories again and again of lost tribes and cities in the rainforest. Added to his own research of the literature of the region, this fired Fawcett's imagination, that he would find a lost city, his 'Z'.

Fawcett's exploits upon his epic journeys into the rainforest read like a script from an Indiana Jones movie, for which he must surely be a role model. He faced swarms of insects, spiders the size of dinner plates, starvation and disease. He was forced to run for his life from hostile natives always avoiding violent confrontation. He recorded in his journal the discovery of Giant anacondas 60ft in length and a breed of dog with two noses; it is now known that both these animals do exist although the Anacondas rarely exceed 40ft! His tales were met with a certain amount of disbelief back in England. But driving his work was always the search for the Lost City.

Since the discovery of Machu Picchu in the Andes in 1911, tantalising remains of pottery and inscriptions from the Brazilian rainforest had hinted at lost civilisations. The romantic side of Fawcett's nature was captured by a black basalt figure presented to him by the adventure writer Rider Haggard. Beyond the experience of British Museum, Fawcett took the figure to a psychic who produced an elaborate story of an ancient lost civilization, powerful and rich in material wealth that was destroyed before the time of the Ancient Egyptians. From this Fawcett constructed his own theory that that the statue came from an Atlantean civilization, and that it may be possible to find survivors at a point called 'Z' in the unexplored Matto Grosso jungle.

Fawcett's final expedition of 1925, an ambitious and exceedingly dangerous journey into the unexplored heart of the South American rainforest was self financed and was to be achieved by travelling light with just his son Jack and his friend Raleigh Rimmell as companions. The omens were not good from the beginning, Fawcett was now 57 his son had inherited his incredible stamina and communication skills but Rimmell was unable to learn Portuguese and was susceptible to insect attacks. Their mules were lame and poorly nourished and they had no radio contact. But his final letter to his

wife was full on confidence '*you need have no fear of failure*' he wrote with great optimism, the small party were never heard of again.

At the time of Fawcett's disappearance he was famous around the world, the last of the golden age of explorers, who ventured into the unknown and with little hope of rescue if things went wrong. Rumours abounded that hostile Indians had killed him or that he was a prisoner in the jungle. Expeditions were despatched against Fawcett's wishes to try and locate his last known position. But no concrete evidence was found to explain their fate.

As a final twist to the tale, however dubious Fawcett's theory of a lost City in the rainforest may have seemed then, it has now been shown to have more than a degree of truth. Traces of a lost civilization have been found in the rainforest, this advanced society may have still been in existence when the Portuguese conquistadors arrived in Brazil but now all that survives the devastation caused by contact and western disease are the remains of the irrigation systems, pottery and scattered remnant populations of Indians who have within their folklore a myth of a lost city in the rainforest.