

THE HUNT FOR COLONEL FAWCETT

“For every Colonel Fawcett known to the world, there are a hundred such who have disappeared and remain entirely unheard of.”

(*The Rivers Ran East*, Leonard Clark, 1953)

The Making of an Adventurer

Percy Harrison Fawcett (1867-?) was born in Torquay, Devon in 1867. His Indian-born father Edward was something of a rake, a friend of the Prince of Wales, and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, from whom young Percy undoubtedly got his penchant for adventure (Percy's older brother Edward became a writer of adventure books). From an early age, however, he disapproved of his parents' racy lifestyle and became a serious, academic loner. Aged nineteen, and against his will, he took up a commission in the Royal Artillery and was posted to Trincomalee in Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka). As Lieutenant Colonel Fawcett he served brilliantly and met his future wife Nina there, but it was how he filled his leisure time that was to set the tone for the rest of his life. Leaving his fellow officers to their drinking, gambling, and fraternising with the locals, he would wander off into the jungle interior of the island, seeking out ancient ruins and recording mysterious inscriptions.



In 1901, whilst working for the British Secret Service in Morocco, Fawcett taught himself surveying, a skill which was to prove invaluable when in 1906 he travelled to Amazonia at the behest of the Royal Geographical Society, to map the jungle border between the central west Brazilian state of Mato Grosso (meaning ‘Great Forest’), and Bolivia. The area was rich in rubber plantations and without accurate borders it was feared dangerous disputes would result over their exploitation.

Fawcett was in his element once again and between 1906 and 1921 accepted additional South American commissions resulting in a total of seven major expeditions into the jungle (1906-1907, 1907-1908, 1910, 1911, 1913, 1913-1914, and 1921). Appalled by the way in which some plantation owners treated the Indians, Fawcett himself appears to have got along well with them, using his patience, courteousness, and, of course, gifts to good effect. During a survey of the Bolivian-Peruvian border, for example, his team was attacked by Indians firing 6-foot-long arrows. Rather than returning fire one of them played an accordion and when the attack was halted Fawcett addressed the Indians in their native tongue. The Indians were so impressed that they helped the party set up camp and even sent word up river to ensure their safe passage. The herculean efforts Fawcett made in mapping the region in the years before the Great War are often overlooked in favour of what eventually became of him, but it should not be forgotten that he received the RGS Founders Gold Medal in 1916 for his achievements; the society saw fit to publish Fawcett's article *Bolivian Exploration* in the March 1915 edition of their *Geographical Journal*.

Lost Worlds

As in Ceylon, during these expeditions he eagerly sought out archaeological remains along the way, noting down his thoughts in a series of letters and notebooks. He was intrigued by stories he heard about the lost civilisations of South America and in one of his reports, to the Royal Geographical Society in 1910, he said: “...I have met half

a dozen men who swear to a glimpse of white Indians with red hair. Such communication as there has been in certain parts with the wild Indians asserts the existence of such a race with blue eyes. Plenty of people have heard of them in the interior.” Fawcett went on to conclude that worldwide similarities in ancient structures and scripts indicated that early human civilisation stemmed from a single source, an ancient and long-forgotten civilisation akin to Plato’s Atlantis. He believed ardently that the remains of that civilisation lay somewhere in the green hell of Mato Grosso and its surroundings.

During his expeditions Fawcett also noted many creatures that he believed were unfamiliar to science. Long studied by students of cryptozoology they included the *Milta* (a black doglike cat about the size of a foxhound), the *Doubled Nosed Andean Tiger Hound* (“about the size of a pointer, it is highly valued for its acute sense of smell and igenuity in hunting jaguars”), the blood-sucking *Buichonchas* cockroach, the poisonous *Surucucu Agapa Fogo* (“large yellow reptile as much as twenty feet in length”), the *Bufo* (“a mammal of the manatee species, rather human in appearance, with prominent breasts”), and a gigantic poisonous *apazauca* spider, which clambered onto Fawcett as he was getting inside his sleeping bag on the banks of the Yalu River. Considered even more fanciful by his critics were the reports of oversized creatures, including a Giant Anaconda sixty two feet long (20 metres) in the Rio Negro, and the tracks of “some mysterious and enormous beast” in the Madidi swamps of the Beni in Bolivia, believed by Fawcett to be possibly those of a living Diplodocus!

Idol Dreaming

No idle dreamer Fawcett was very much a man of his age and during the 1890s, like so many of his intellectual contemporaries across Europe and America, he fell under the spell of Helena Blavatsky, the Russian aristocratic mystic and founder of the so-called Theosophical movement. Blavatsky’s teachings fuelled Fawcett’s unswerving belief in lost civilisations, cities of gold, living prehistoric monsters, and the existence of fair-haired natives descended directly from an Atlantean super-race in the Mediterranean. In turn he influenced others, most significantly Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Fawcett maintained that Doyle’s popular book *The Lost World* was conjured up after the author attended one of Fawcett’s lectures in 1912, during which the explorer recounted seeing the abrupt precipices of the flat-topped Serra Ricardo Franco during an expedition to map the headwaters of the Rio Verde River in eastern Bolivia (others maintain Doyle was inspired by Mt. Roraima in Venezuela). For this especially gruelling foray into uncharted wilderness Fawcett could find few men willing to accompany him, and eventually took two Indians, a waiter, a silversmith, and a baker! The group survived on palm tops and hard chonta nuts, and were ravaged by inch long poisonous ants.



With all this in mind it is perhaps not surprising that Fawcett was so inspired when none other than author Sir H. Rider Haggard presented him with a curious black basalt idol, reputed to have come from one of the lost cities in Brazil. Fawcett wrote of it, “I could think of only one way of learning the secret of the stone image, and that was by means of psychometry – a method that may evoke scorn by many people but is widely accepted by others who have managed to keep their minds free from prejudice.” The psychometrist, holding the idol in a darkened room, wrote of “a large irregularly shaped continent stretching from the north coast of Africa across to South America...Then I see volcanoes in violent eruptions, flaming lava pouring down their sides, and the whole land shakes with a mighty rumbling sound...The voice says: “The judgment of

Atlanta will be the fate of all who presume to deific power!” I can get no definite date of the catastrophe, but it was long prior to the rise of Egypt, and has been forgotten – except, perhaps, in myth.”

Genuine or not the psychometrist had told the colonel exactly what he wanted to hear. Fawcett now held this to be incontrovertible proof of his theories, “that amazing ruins of ancient cities – ruins incomparably older than those in Egypt – exist in the far interior of the Matto Grosso.” He went on to assert that “the connection of Atlantis with parts of what is now Brazil is not to be dismissed contemptuously, and belief in it – with or without scientific corroboration – affords explanations for many problems which otherwise are unsolved mysteries.” It would be a textbook example of a well-meaning, but amateur, historian drawing sweeping historical conclusions from little more than dogged belief – and it would cost him dearly.

That the idol came from one of these lost South American cities Fawcett was now in no doubt, indeed it could even have hailed from a city whose existence he had long suspected, but not yet been able to pinpoint exactly. The basis for his belief lay in the copy of a log of a doomed Portuguese gold mining expedition from 1753 (Manuscript No. 512 in the Rio de Janeiro National Library). The expedition’s final report before vanishing forever, sent by Indian Runner to the Viceroy in Bahía, told of an abrupt range of mountains in the previously unexplored north of Mato Grosso, on the top of which lay a vast ruined city with the promise of gold. Fifty miles away there were silver mines, abandoned except for two white-skinned men who promptly vanished into the undergrowth. Unable to dismiss the report Fawcett called his own city simply “Z”, which he claimed somewhat cryptically was “for the sake of convenience”. The colonel was now determined to locate it – and to re-write the history books in the process.

Quest for the City of Z

The story of the fate of Colonel Fawcett’s last expedition is an oft-told one, being cited by some as the original inspiration for all classic tales of jungle adventure, from *Boy’s Own* to Indiana Jones. Returning to Britain for active service during the Great War, Fawcett had returned to Brazil for another expedition in 1921, to explore the western region of Brazil. That expedition had failed to reach its goals and the now ageing Fawcett subsequently grew increasingly impatient to set out on what would be his eighth, and now his most glorious, expedition. With funding in place from a London group of financiers known as ‘The Glove’, the expedition finally came together in 1925, consisting of Fawcett, his eldest son Jack, a would-be Hollywood actor, and Jack’s best friend Raleigh Rimmell. Fawcett had always preferred small expeditions that could live off the land, believing that a small group would look less like an invasion to the Indians and therefore be less likely to be attacked.



No novice in exploration Fawcett planned the expedition exactingly, yet prior to departure issued a curious instruction to those he would leave behind: “I don’t want rescue parties coming to look for us. It’s too risky. If with all my experience we can’t make it, there’s not much hope for others. That’s one reason why I’m not telling exactly where we’re going. Whether we get through, and emerge again, or leave our bones to rot

in there, one thing’s certain. The answer to the enigma of ancient South America – and perhaps of the prehistoric world – may be found when those old cities are located and opened up to scientific research. That the cities exist, I know...”

On 20th April the party struck out north from Cuyaba (Cuiabá), the capital of Mato Grosso, planning later to turn eastwards through the great uncharted wilderness between the Xingú and Araguaya Rivers, both south-eastern tributaries of the Amazon. Beyond, in the Serra do Roncador ('Snoring Mountains'), Fawcett hoped to find his own lost city of Z, after which he would cross the Rio São Francisco into Bahía state to explore the 'lost city' of the 1753 expedition, and finish on the coast at Salvador (Bahía). On May 29th, 1925, the 58-year-old Fawcett sent a final message to his wife indicating that the expedition was crossing the Upper Xingú, and was now poised to enter *terra incognita*. "Our two guides go back from here," he wrote "They are more and more nervous as we push further into the Indian country." Carrying only minimal provisions (as well as Rider Haggard's curious idol) Fawcett reassured his wife with these words: "You need have no fear of failure...". The three members of the Fawcett expedition then disappeared into the jungle never to be seen or heard from again.

The Hunt for Colonel Fawcett

Despite the colonel's wishes, more than a dozen expeditions have subsequently set out to discover the fate of the lost expedition, allegedly claiming the lives of a hundred men and producing very little useful evidence in the process. For some, 'looking for Fawcett' became an obsession, even a profession of sorts, offering exactly the type of adventure the colonel himself found so addictive. And there was commercial gain to be had too, whether in the form of book deals and newspaper articles for those leading rescue parties, or rewards for those Indians willing to reveal evidence, however spurious, of the lost expedition. Finding evidence of Fawcett himself became a potentially more lucrative business than finding his fabulous lost city.

The Fawcett expedition was not expected back until 1927, but when its members failed to reappear the rumours started flying. Perhaps the colonel had lost his mind, or been held captive against his wishes by Indians, or else had decided to stay amongst a tribe of cannibals, who now saw him as their chief? So the first major rescue party set out a year later in earnest, led by Commander George Miller Dyott, a man familiar with the Brazilian hinterland. Despite being dubbed "The Suicide Club" it attracted a huge number of volunteers out looking for adventure. Dyott picked up Fawcett's trail in Bakari, and followed it across the wilderness of Central Brazil and into the Amazon forest, but was eventually driven back by hostile Indians and lack of supplies. From what he could glean from the local Kalapolo tribe, and the discovery of a plate carrying Fawcett's name round the neck of an Indian, the colonel and the others had most likely been massacred, as detailed in Dyott's book *Man Hunting in the Jungle – Being the Story of a Search for Three Explorers Lost in the Brazilian Wilds* (1930) (filmed later as *Manhunt in the Jungle* (1958)).

A very different story emerged from the jungle four years later courtesy of a Swiss traveller called Stephan Rattin. He had travelled into Mato Grosso north-north-west of Cuyaba, along the Rio Arinos, where he claimed to have met an elderly white man with a long beard held captive by the Indians. The man revealed himself as Colonel Fawcett and showed him a signet ring, which he asked him to describe upon his return to São Paulo. Although doubted by many, Nina Fawcett said she recognised the description of her husband's ring, stirring up enough interest for a second expedition to be mounted.

This one was notable for the presence of Peter Fleming (1907-1971), brother of James Bond creator Ian Fleming, who in April 1932 replied to an advertisement in the personal columns of *The Times*: "Exploring and sporting expedition under

experienced guidance leaving England June to explore rivers Central Brazil, if possible ascertain fate Colonel Fawcett; abundant game, big and small; exceptional fishing; ROOM TWO MORE GUNS; highest references expected and given.” With Fleming as official correspondent for *The Times* the expedition, organised by Robert Churchward, embarked for São Paulo, then travelled overland to the Araguaya River, from where it headed for the Upper Xingú and ‘Dead Horse Camp’, the likely last-known position of the Fawcett expedition. Riven by internal disagreements from the start, focused mainly on its leader, one Captain Holman, Fleming soon formed a breakaway party to look for the colonel independently. They both made slow progress for several days, before admitting defeat.



The return to civilisation became a closely-fought race between the two parties, the prize being the privilege of reporting home first, and gaining the upper hand in the inevitable squabbles over blame, squandered finances, and book contracts. Fleming’s party narrowly won, returning to England in November 1932. His tale of the fiasco, *Brazilian Adventure* (1934), is now considered a minor classic of travel writing, in which Fleming, on the subject of Fawcett, remarked that “enough legend has grown up around the subject to form a new and separate branch of folk-lore.”. Meanwhile, Robert Churchward’s

own wonderfully-titled *Wilderness of Fools – An Account of the Adventures in Search of Lieut.-Colonel P. H. Fawcett* (1936) vanished much like its subject.

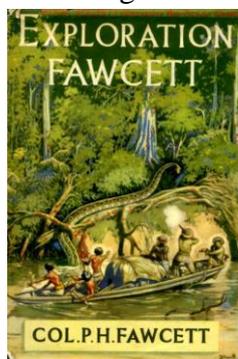
Fawcett Fever

Except for the plate carrying Fawcett’s name that was found in 1928, and a theodolite compass recovered in 1933 (possibly jettisoned during an earlier expedition), nothing tangible had ever emerged from the jungle since the colonel’s disappearance in 1925. The truth was probably always that the expedition had been murdered, either by hostile Indians (most likely the Xavante, Suyás, or Kayapós, whose territory they were unwisely entering), or else friendlier ones (the Kalapolo, who were possibly the last to see them alive and reported that the two younger men were lame). Disease and illness might also have been to blame, although starvation seems less likely given the seemingly indestructible Fawcett’s previous jungle experience. If the Kalapolo *were* the culprits perhaps they believed that killing the three men would spare them a worse fate at the hands of more aggressive tribes? The story came to a head in 1948 when the Xingú-Roncador Expedition was laying out airfields in the territory of the Kalapolo Indians. They won the confidence of Kalapolo Chief Ixarari, who confessed to having killed Fawcett and his two companions after Jack Fawcett had made a local girl pregnant. This would explain rumours circulating since the mid-1930s of a young pale-faced Indian seen in the area. The three bodies were weighted with stones and thrown into the Tanguro River but fearing detection they were retrieved and left on the bank to be scavenged, after which the bones were dispersed.

Conversely, according to the Brazilian Orlando Villas Boas, the Kalapolo murdered the men because they had run out of gifts to encourage the Indians to continue helping them, the younger members being thrown in the river and the colonel buried, out of respect. In 1951 Villas Boas even produced a skeleton said to be that of Fawcett but subsequent bone analysis disproved his claim.

With so little to go on Fawcett rumour-mongering eventually reached fever pitch. In 1947, for example, a New Zealand schoolteacher by the name of Hugh McCarthy quit his job and went in search of Fawcett’s lost city of gold using carrier pigeons giving news of his progress. The last related not only details of his imminent death but also made reference to an earlier communication giving the exact location of the city: the

pigeon carrying that particular letter never arrived, and McCarthy himself was never seen again. Meanwhile the author Harold T. Wilkins, in his book *Secret Cities of Old South America* (1950), related how an anonymous informant had told him that a German anthropologist by the name of Ehrmann had seen Colonel Fawcett's shrunken head in a village in the Upper Xingú in 1932; apparently the colonel had died defending his son Jack, who had broken some sort of tribal taboo.

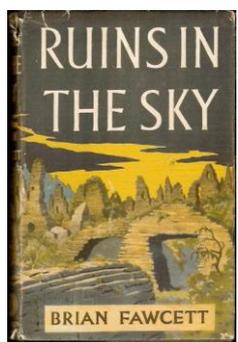


To set the record straight, almost three decades after his disappearance, the colonel's own records, manuscripts and letters finally saw the light of day. *Exploration Fawcett* was expertly compiled by his younger son Brian Fawcett (1906-1984) and was an immediate bestseller. According to the colonel the manuscript of his own planned book *Travel and Mystery in South America* was lost in 1924, whilst doing the rounds of potential American publishers, and so we shall never know what it contained. Instead we have his son's thrilling and highly readable account of his father's jungle adventures, peppered with Brian's own expertly drawn maps and illustrations. Yet still no answer was provided as to the fate of the expedition: "Up to the time of writing these words the fate of my father and the two others is as much of a mystery as it ever was. It is possible that the riddle may never be solved?"

Colonel Fawcett's interest in the occult also ensured a steady flow of more esoteric accounts, chief amongst which was Geraldine Dorothy Cummins' *The Fate of Colonel Fawcett: A Narrative of His last Expedition* (1955), based on her supposed psychic contacts with the colonel up until 1948, when he reported his own death to her! Fawcett's wife Nina also claimed that she received telepathic messages from her husband as late as 1934, and the family are said to have employed a medium to analyse a scarf once worn by the colonel: the result was a trance in which the medium clearly saw the party murdered and their bodies dumped in a lake.

Ruins in the Sky

Prompted by the discovery of the alleged skeleton of his father by Villas Boas, Brian Fawcett himself now embarked on two expeditions into the Matto Grosso, in an attempt to solve the mystery. A tough traveller himself having worked for the Peruvian railways, with a striking physical resemblance to his father, the result was his own book *Ruins in the Sky* (1958). Although once again no answer was given to



the fate of his father, he did manage to throw conclusive light on the city of "Z". Using the reported sighting of a lost city by one Colonel Francisco Barros Fournier, in the *Review of the Geographical Society* for 1938, Fawcett was able to fly over the area, located six kilometres west of Pedra da Baliza in Goiás state, which is sandwiched between Mato Grosso and Bahía. The walls and towers were nothing more than a naturally eroded series of ridges, exactly like those of the *Sete Cidades*, a group of seven alleged 'lost cities' he also visited in the far north of Piauí state. He also writes sceptically of reports he encountered that the colonel and Jack now lived in a secret underground city from where the world was ruled by superior beings, a far-fetched notion that still helps sell esoteric books today. Brian Fawcett's motives for taking up the story after such a long time are unclear. A good writer and an excellent draftsman perhaps he thought it high time that he shared a little of the excitement, and the obvious financial rewards, being generated by the Fawcett legend. He speaks respectfully of his father's achievements, yet he also

recalls his feeling in the presence of his father as one of “uncomfortable apprehension, like being in the company of a well disposed but uncertain schoolmaster.” And his dedication of *Ruins in the Sky* to his wife Ruth, “the one who was not left behind”, is certainly a pointed remark on his father’s seeming abandonment of Nina over so many years of adventuring. Of his father’s historical professionalism he also casts some doubt, claiming to have no idea “how much was based on research, how much on personal knowledge, and how much on the babblings of clairvoyants.” Compared with his older brother Jack, apparently his father’s favourite, Brian perhaps felt unimportant. Was good quality writing (and a little debunking) perhaps a way of getting even with his father and brother, by achieving something neither of them were able to do? Or was there something more sinister at play?

The Colonel Comes of Age

Forty years later, and Fawcett fever hit the news once again. In 1996 a television expedition put together by René Delmotte and James Lynch set off into Mato Grosso to search for any remaining traces of the colonel. It didn’t get far. Kalapolo Indians stopped the group and held them hostage for several days, only releasing them after confiscating \$60,000 worth of equipment. Rather more successful was a one-man expedition undertaken in 1998 by renowned maverick adventurer and anthropologist Benedict Allen, who filmed his own progress as part of the BBC’s *Video Diaries* series. In exchange for an outboard motor he was told by the then chief of the Kalapolo that his tribe had nothing to do with the expedition’s demise, and that Fawcett and his two companions died four or five days east of Kalapolo territory, at the hands of the aggressive Iaruna tribe. Allen was also told that the Villa Boas skeleton was certainly *not* that of Fawcett but rather that of the chief’s own grandfather.

With the start of a new millennium the Fawcett legend came of age with probably the most extraordinary twist in its very long tale. In 2002 a Czech theatre director called Misha Williams informed the press that the Fawcett family had agreed to grant him exclusive, first-hand access to the Fawcett family archives. What he uncovered, he claimed, was a revelation. Williams stated categorically that Brian Fawcett, in collusion with the rest of the Fawcett family, had deliberately obscured his father’s tracks in the book *Exploration Fawcett*, having always known and condoned the fact that the expedition never intended to return, but rather to set up a Utopian commune deep in the jungle, part of what the colonel called his “Great Scheme”. And why not? After all, “The English go native very easily,” the colonel once wrote, “there is no disgrace in it.” This new society, according to the alleged secret papers, would be founded on Madam Blavatsky’s Theosophical principles, which the colonel had perfected over the years with the help of a spirit entity he called “M”. Quite understandably, the Fawcett family had considered the world not yet ready for such sensational information.

If indeed William’s seemingly outlandish claims are true, it is little wonder that the missing expedition was never located, since the rescue parties had been searching in the wrong place! Perhaps Fawcett had in fact found exactly what he was looking for, but for reasons unknown was unable to reveal the location and significance of “Z” to a waiting world? Were it not for the fact that Misha Williams was promoting a play he had written on the subject, called *AmaZonia*, at the very same time as he made these astounding claims, one might almost have believed him. Indeed, if it weren’t for the handful of blurred photographs of the colonel that still exist in books, and the fact that several other explorers have disappeared over the years under similarly mysterious circumstances (for example American aviator Paul Rinaldo Redfern and French

journalist Raymond Maufrais) one could even be led into believing that Percy Harrison Fawcett himself never existed.

In 2009 Fawcett fever returned once more, with the publication of *The Lost City of Z* by David Grann, a respected writer for *The New Yorker*. More adept at writing than exploring (his own 2005 expedition into the Amazon is humorously described) the book's greatest revelation is the fact that the Kalapalo still recall Colonel Fawcett in their oral history, since Fawcett and his companions were some of the first white men the tribe had ever encountered. Tantalisingly, in the last chapter of the book, Grann reports that a monumental civilization seems actually to have existed near where Fawcett was looking, its remains, which date back to 1100 AD, having been discovered recently by archaeologist Michael Heckenberger. His work has been hailed as proof that the rainforest once contained civilizations nearly as rich and complex as those of the Inca, the Maya, and the Europeans. More prosaically, and perhaps inevitably given the perennial nature of the Fawcett story, the book's film rights have been sold to Paramount Pictures, with none other than heart throb actor Brad Pitt initially slated to produce and star (up and coming actor Charlie Hunnam will now take the role). One can only wonder what the Colonel would have made of that!

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Books by Lt.-Col. Percy Harrison Fawcett:

Exploration Fawcett edited by Brian Fawcett (1953) (also published as *Lost Trails, Lost Cities*)

Articles by Lt.-Col. Percy Harrison Fawcett:

Bolivian Exploration, Geographical Journal, Royal Geographical Society (March 1915)

Books about Lt.-Col. Percy Harrison Fawcett:

Man Hunting in the Jungle – Being the Story of a Search for Three Explorers Lost in the Brazilian Wilds by George Miller Dyott (1930)

Brazilian Adventure by Peter Fleming (1934)

Wilderness of Fools – An Account of the Adventures in Search of Lieut.-Colonel P. H. Fawcett by Robert Churchward (1936)

The Fate of Colonel Fawcett – A Narrative of His Last Expedition by Geraldine Dorothy Cummins & E. Beatrice Gibbs (1955)

With Colonel Fawcett in the Amazon Basin by Harry Williams (1960)

Ruins in the Sky by Brian Fawcett (1958)

The Lost City of Z by David Grann (2009)

Websites about Lt.-Col. Percy Harrison Fawcett:

www.fawcettadventure.com