

INTREPID TRAVELLER

Percy Harrison Fawcett

In 1925 renowned British explorer Lieutenant Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett headed into the Amazon jungle. Searching for a lost city, he was never heard from again. Travel writer **Duncan J.D. Smith** picks up the trail of one of the 20th century's greatest adventure mysteries.

With the new action adventure film *The Lost City of Z* recently released (2017), now is the time to celebrate its enigmatic and reluctant hero, Lieutenant Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett. A fearless geographer and rogue archaeologist, his daredevil exploits inspired Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* and more recently the adventures of Indiana Jones. His unexplained disappearance in the Amazon Jungle has become the stuff of *Boy's Own* legend.

The Making of an Adventurer

Percival Harrison Fawcett was born in 1867 in Torquay in the English county of Devon. His Indian-born father, Edward, was something of a rake, an equerry to the Prince of Wales, and a drinker. Young Percy undoubtedly inherited his father's sense of adventure but from an early age he disapproved of his racy lifestyle. Instead he became a serious and 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). He served brilliantly and it was there that he met his future wife, Nina. But it was how he filled his leisure time that was to really 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.

Later in 1901, whilst working for the British Secret Service in Morocco, Fawcett brushed up on his surveying, a skill he had first taken up at the Royal Geographical Society on London's Savile Row. This was to prove invaluable when in 1906 he travelled to Amazonia at the

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Society's behest to map the jungle border between the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso and Bolivia. The area was rich in rubber plantations and without accurate borders it was feared dangerous disputes would result over their exploitation. With the mass production of automobiles in full swing, the demand for rubber was enormous.

Renowned for his remarkable stamina and resistance to disease, Fawcett was in his element. Between 1906 and 1921

he embarked on no less than seven South American mapping commissions contributing much to the Society's ongoing mission to map the world.

Fawcett was appalled, however, by the way in which some plantation owners treated the Indians of Amazonia. By contrast he appears to have got along well with them, using his patience, courteousness, and, of course, gifts to good effect. During one survey exploring the Heath River in Bolivia, for example, his expedition was attacked by Indians of the Guarayos tribe firing 7-foot-long arrows. Rather than returning fire one of Fawcett's men 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 safeguard their passage.

The herculean efforts Fawcett made in mapping the region in the years before World War I, however, have all too often been overshadowed by his eventual disappearance. It therefore should not be forgotten that he received the Royal Geographical Society's Founder's Gold Medal in 1916 and the Society also saw fit to publish several of his articles. Both were considerable accolades.

Lost Worlds

Very much his own man and certainly

Right: Lieutenant Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett in 1911

no idle dreamer, Fawcett was still a man bound by his times. His writings show that despite being relatively enlightened, he could never quite escape what has been called “the mental maze of race”. Additionally during the 1890s, like many of his intellectual contemporaries, he fell under the spell of Helena Blavatsky, the Russian aristocratic mystic and founder of the so-called Theosophical Society. Blavatsky’s belief that the world was ruled by mysterious white-skinned Elders from secret locations fuelled Fawcett’s own growing interest in a lost Amazonian civilisation, one once peopled by an Atlantean super-race from the Mediterranean.

In turn Fawcett influenced others, most notably the creator of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Fawcett maintained that Doyle’s popular book *The Lost World* was conjured up after the author attended one of his lectures in 1911. During the lecture Fawcett recounted seeing the abrupt precipices of the Ricardo Franco Hills, a part of the Huanchaca Plateau in northeast Bolivia. Such a remote high plateau lies at the heart of Doyle’s book (although others have claimed that Doyle was inspired by the equally impressive Mount Roraima in the Pacaraima Mountains of Guyana). During this gruelling foray into uncharted wilderness Fawcett survived on palm tops and hard chonta nuts, and was repeatedly ravaged by inch-long poisonous ants.

With all this in mind it is perhaps no surprise that Fawcett was encouraged in his work when the adventure story writer Sir H. Rider Haggard presented him with a curious black basalt idol. Reputed to have come from a lost city in Brazil, Fawcett took it to be incontrovertible proof of his belief “that amazing ruins of ancient cities – ruins incomparably older than those in Egypt – exist in the far interior of the Mato 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.” Whilst Fawcett would indeed go on to find evidence for lost and hitherto unrecorded pre-Columbian societies in Amazonia in the form of causeways, canals and pottery, all lost beneath rampant vegetation after their inhabitants had succumbed either to conquest or disease, the sweeping

conclusions he drew from them were sometimes based on ill-founded, dogged belief – and they would cost him dearly.

That the idol came from one of these lost South American cities Fawcett was in no doubt. Indeed, it could have hailed from one whose existence he had already read about. The evidence for it lay in the log of a Portuguese gold mining expedition from 1753 (Manuscript No. 512 in the Rio de Janeiro National Library). The expedition’s report sent by Indian runner to the Viceroy in Bahia 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. Inspired by the report Fawcett now gave his own imagined city an enigmatic name – “Z” – which he claimed was “for the sake of convenience” but was more likely to protect its location from possible competitors (the British polar explorer Robert Falcon Scott had around the same time been beaten to the South Pole by his Norwegian competitor Roald Amundsen). Fawcett was now determined to locate his “Z” for real – and to re-write the history books in the process.

The Quest for Z

The story of the fate of Colonel Fawcett’s last expedition is an oft-told one, being cited as the original inspiration for all classic tales of jungle adventure.

After active service in the trenches of France during the Great War, where he was promoted to lieutenant colonel for his bravery in holding his position, Fawcett returned to Brazil in 1921 for another expedition, to explore the western region of the country. Once again Fawcett returned from the jungle alive but he had failed to find evidence for “Z”. Now in his late 50s but still remarkably fit, he was adamant that his eighth expedition would be the one to provide the evidence he was looking for. With funding in place from a London group of financiers known as ‘The Glove’, the expedition finally came together in 1925, and consisted 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 such a group would look less like an invasion to indigenous tribes and would therefore less likely be attacked. No novice in exploration, Fawcett planned the expedition meticulously yet prior to departure issued an ominous instruction to those he was leaving 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.”

The three men began their journey on the coast at São Paulo from where they took the train to Corumbá, a frontier town near the Bolivian border. From there a boat took them along the River Paraguay to Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso, which Raleigh described as “a God forsaken hole”. This was the stepping off point for what Fawcett called “the attainment of the great purpose”.

On 20th April, 1925 the party struck out northwards to the impoverished village of Bakairí Post. From there the plan was to eventually turn eastwards through the great uncharted wilderness between the Tapajós and Xingu Rivers (both south-eastern tributaries of the Amazon) and the Araguaia River. Somewhere east of the Xingu, in the mysterious Serra do Roncador (‘Snoring Mountains’), Fawcett hoped to find “Z”. Thereafter the party would cross the Rio São Francisco into Bahia state to explore the ruined city described in the 1753 manuscript, and

finish up on the coast at the capital, Salvador.

On May 29th, 1925, Fawcett sent a message to his wife indicating that the expedition was crossing the Upper Xingu, and was now poised to enter territory hitherto unexplored by Europeans. “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 final words: “You need have no fear of failure...”. The three members of the Fawcett expedition then disappeared into the jungle never to be heard from again.



Left: Map showing the Mato Grosso area in South America. Below left: Percy Fawcett fishing in the Upper Madidi, Bolivia, 1913-1914 (Image: RGS:IBG) Below: Cover of *Brazilian Adventure* written by Peter Fleming in 1934 and Peter Fleming himself

The Hunt for Colonel Fawcett

Despite the Colonel's wishes, more than a dozen expeditions subsequently set out to discover the fate of the lost expedition. Allegedly claiming the lives of up to a hundred men, they generated little useful evidence of Fawcett's fate. For some, 'looking for Fawcett' became an obsession, even a profession of sorts, offering exactly the type of adventure Fawcett 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 explorers. Over time, finding evidence of Fawcett became a more lucrative business than finding his fabulous lost city.

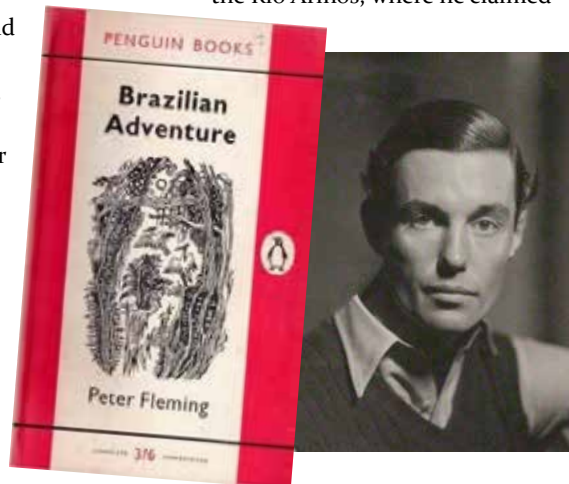
The Fawcett expedition was not expected back until 1927 but when it failed to return the rumours started flying. The first major rescue party set out a year later in earnest, led by Commander George Miller Dyott, a man familiar with the Brazilian hinterland. Despite being dubbed "The Suicide Club" it attracted a huge number of volunteers looking for adventure.

Dyott picked up Fawcett's trail in the village of Bakairi Post, and followed it across the wilderness of Central Brazil into the Amazon forest but was eventually driven back by hostile Indians and lack of supplies. From what Dyott could glean from the Kalapalo tribe of the Upper Xingu, and the discovery of a brass plate around the neck of an Indian bearing the name of the company that had supplied Fawcett's gear, the Colonel and the others had most likely been murdered.

These sketchy findings were detailed in Dyott's extravagantly-titled book *Man*

Hunting in the Jungle – Being the Story of a Search for Three Explorers Lost in the Brazilian Wilds (1930), which received the silver screen treatment in 1958 as *Manhunt in the Jungle*.

A very different story emerged from the jungle four years later courtesy of a Swiss traveller called Stefan Rattin. He had travelled into Mato Grosso along the Rio Arinos, where he claimed



to have met an elderly white man with a long beard held captive by Indians. The man allegedly revealed himself as Colonel Fawcett and showed him a signet ring, which he asked Rattin to report upon his return to São Paulo. Fawcett's wife Nina said she recognised immediately the description of the ring, stirring up enough interest for further rescue expeditions to be mounted.

One of the more successful expeditions was notable for the presence of Peter Fleming, 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."

With Fleming onboard as official correspondent, the expedition organised by Robert Churchward embarked for São Paulo. From there it travelled overland to the Araguaia River and then headed for the Upper Xingu and 'Dead Horse Camp', the last reported position of the Fawcett expedition (the camp was so-named because Fawcett had shot a sick pack horse there on an earlier expedition). Riven by internal disagreements from the start, however, Fleming soon formed a breakaway party to look for Fawcett independently. Both made slow progress for several days before finally admitting defeat.

The return to civilization 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". By contrast, Robert Churchward's wonderfully-titled *Wilderness of Fools – An Account of the Adventures in Search of Lieut.-Colonel P. H. Fawcett* (1936) vanished as mysteriously as its subject.

Fawcett Fever

Except for the brass name plate recovered by Dyott in 1928 and a theodolite compass recovered in 1933 (probably jettisoned during an earlier expedition), nothing tangible had ever emerged from the jungle since the Colonel's disappearance in 1925. Most likely the expedition had been murdered either by hostile Indians (perhaps the Xavante, Suyás or Kayapós,



Left: Cover of Brian Fawcett's book, *Ruins in the Sky*
Below: Jack Fawcett and Raleigh Rimmell, 1925.

Right: Arthur Abbott, Consul General, São Paulo interviewing Stefan Rattin.
Far right: Jack Fawcett on the 1925 expedition to Brazil (All images: RGS:IBG)

whose territory Fawcett was unwisely entering) or else friendlier ones, like the Kalapalo, who were probably the last to see the men alive and subsequently reported that the two younger members were lame. Or they might have been murdered for their rifles by renegade soldiers roaming the forest in the wake of a recent revolution in the area. Disease or some accident might also have been to blame, although starvation seems less likely given Fawcett's longstanding expertise in living off the land. It is also unlikely that the expedition got lost.

In 1948 another expedition, the Xingu-Roncador Expedition, was laying out airfields in the territory of the Kalapalo Indians. They won the confidence of Kalapalo Chief Ixarari, who claimed to have killed Fawcett and his two companions after Jack Fawcett had fathered a child with a local girl. This bolstered rumours circulating since the mid-1930s of a young pale-faced Indian seen in the area (another expedition had recently returned with an albino boy named Dulipé, who its leader insisted was Jack's son). The chief went on to say that the three bodies were then weighted with stones and thrown into the Tanguro River. Fearing detection, however, he claimed the bodies were later retrieved and left on the bank to be scavenged, after which the bones were dispersed.

In 1951 Brazilian activist Villas Bôas produced a skeleton said to be that of Fawcett but subsequent bone analysis disproved his claim. By bringing closure to the story albeit spuriously Villas Bôas wanted to protect the Indians from further external intrusions.

With so little to go on Fawcett rumour-mongering continued unabated. Author Harold T. Wilkins in his extraordinary 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 Fawcett's shrunken head in a village in the Upper Xingu in 1932. Apparently the Colonel had died defending his son Jack, who had broken some sort of tribal taboo. So the rumours kept coming.

Into the story now steps Fawcett's other son, Brian. Too young to have participated in his father's fateful expedition, he had made a life for himself as a draughtsman on the Peruvian railways. To set the record straight once and for all he compiled his father's reports and letters into a book (according to Fawcett, the manuscript of his own planned book to be called *Travel and Mystery in South America* was lost in 1924, whilst doing the rounds of potential American publishers). The result was the bestselling *Exploration Fawcett* (1953). This thrilling and highly readable retelling of his father's jungle adventures is 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. Is it 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 among them 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 she claims he reported his own death to her. As late as 1934 Fawcett's wife Nina also claimed to have received telepathic messages from her husband, and the family are said to have employed a medium to analyse a scarf once worn by the colonel: in a trance 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 Bôas, Brian Fawcett embarked on two of his own expeditions into the Mato Grosso, in an attempt to solve the mystery for himself. He bore a striking physical resemblance





to his father and was a tough traveller in his own right. The result was his book *Ruins in the Sky* (1958).

Although once again no answer was given to the fate of his father, Brian did manage to throw some much-needed light on the lost city of “Z”. Using the reported sighting of a lost city by one Colonel Francisco Barros Fournier in the *Review of the American Geographical Society* for 1938, he was able to fly over an area six kilometres west of Pedra da Baliza in the Brazilian state of Goiás, which is sandwiched between Mato Grosso and Bahía. Fournier’s 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’ Brian had visited in the far north of Piauí state. Might “Z” therefore have been nothing more than a geological formation glimpsed fleetingly by his father?

In his book Brian wrote sceptically of reports that his father and brother Jack were living in a secret underground city from where the world was ruled by Madame Blavatsky’s superior Elders, a fantastical notion that still helps sell esoteric books to this day.

Of his father’s historical methodology 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 less

important. Was good quality writing (and a little healthy debunking) perhaps a way of getting even with them by achieving something neither of them were now able to do? Or was there something more sinister at play?

The Colonel comes of age

Fast forward forty years and the Fawcett story was in the news once again. In 1996 a television expedition put together by a Brazilian banker, James Lynch, set off into the Mato Grosso to search for any remaining traces of the Fawcett party. It didn’t get far. Kalapolo Indians stopped the group and held them hostage for several days, only releasing them after confiscating \$30,000 worth of equipment.

Rather more successful was a one-man expedition undertaken two years later by maverick adventurer and anthropologist Benedict Allen, who filmed his progress as part of the BBC’s *Video Diaries* series. In exchange for an outboard motor he was told by the chief of the Kalapalo 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 Bôas 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 yet in its very long tale. In 2002 a Czech theatre director

called Misha Williams informed the press that the Fawcett family had granted him exclusive access to their archives. What he claimed to uncover was a revelation. Brian Fawcett, it seems, in collusion with the rest of the Fawcett family had deliberately obscured his father’s tracks in the book *Exploration Fawcett* by including false coordinates for Fawcett’s last known position (Dead Horse Camp). The reason for this, Williams claimed, was that the family had always known that Fawcett never intended to return and instead hoped to set up a Utopian commune deep in the jungle, part of what he 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 Williams, would be founded on Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophical principles, which the Colonel had been busy perfecting over the years, with the help of a spirit entity he called “M”. The reason for the Fawcett family’s reluctance to divulge the truth, Williams contended, was that the world was not ready for such sensational news. Just as soon as they heard from him, the remaining Fawcett family members would pack their bags and join the Colonel and Jack.

If Williams’ claims are true, it is little



Image: Edmilson Sanches, CC BY-SA 3.0

wonder that the missing expedition was never located since the rescue parties had been looking for Dead Horse Camp in the wrong place. Perhaps Fawcett had in fact found exactly what he was looking for and was just waiting for a chance to get word back to his family?

Cynics might say that such revelations provided publicity for Williams, who at the time was promoting a play he had written about Fawcett called *AmaZonia*. But in yet another twist to the tale, a documentary team pursuing the Fawcett trail subsequently tracked down the explorer's granddaughter, Rolette de Montet-Guerin. She confirmed the coordinates' cover-up and gave her blessing for the team to pursue the correct ones. Armed with Fawcett's signet ring, which had mysteriously turned up in a Brazilian market, they finally identified the real Dead Horse Camp but little more. The result is an engaging piece of documentary film making entitled *Lost in the Amazon*, which has been screened on PBS as part of the Emmy Award-nominated *Secrets of the Dead* series.

In 2009 Fawcett fever returned one more time with the publication of *The Lost City of Z* by David Grann. A

respected writer for *The New Yorker*, Grann reports that the Kalapalo still recall Fawcett in their oral history since the Colonel and his companions were

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some of the first white men the tribe had ever encountered. The book's greatest revelation, however, is that a monumental civilization did actually once exist close to where Fawcett was looking. Its remains, however, which were occupied between 800 and 1600 AD, are not stone but rather earthen. Consisting of massive causeways, ditches and platforms, they are in the process of being revealed by archaeologist Michael Heckenberger, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Florida.

Far from being a 'counterfeit paradise', as had long been claimed, the Amazon rain forest once supported civilizations as complex and populous as those of the Inca and the Maya. This explains the great cities reported by the Spanish conquistadors in their relentless search for El Dorado but which were swallowed up by the forest once their inhabitants had succumbed to European disease. Colonel Fawcett's lost city of "Z" it seems had been there all along. ●

**Above: The Mato Grosso in Brazil
Left: Rolette de Montet-Guerin wearing Lt. Colonel Fawcett's signet ring**