

'Brazil That Never Was' Review: His Own Private Amazon

A British neurologist explores his passionate identification with the reckless adventurer Percy Harrison Fawcett.



British explorer Percy Harrison Fawcett (front right) on the frontier between Brazil and Bolivia in 1908.

PHOTO: GRANGER

By Danny Heitman

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Like the late Oliver Sacks, Andrew Lees is a British neurologist who is also a talented writer of memoir, medical reportage and travelogue. Like Sacks, who died in 2015 at 82, Dr. Lees has made personal eccentricity into something of a cottage industry. A sense of oddness informs Dr. Lees's books, perhaps even more so than those of Sacks, whose signature volumes, such as "Awakenings" and "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat," at least tempered their strange sensibility with mass-market appeal.

But the chief lure of Dr. Lees's books—and their abiding complication—is that they defy easy classification. This was surely true of "Mentored by a Madman," a 2017 account of how the drug-addled beat poet William Burroughs shaped Dr. Lees's research into Parkinson's disease. It's equally the case with "Brazil That Never Was," which chronicles his obsession with the vanished British explorer Percy Harrison Fawcett.

Fawcett disappeared in 1925 while searching for a legendary lost city along the Amazon. His exploits were the subject of David Grann's popular 2009 biography "The Lost City of Z," which was adapted into a 2016 film. But it was an earlier book about Fawcett that first got Dr. Lees's attention.

After Fawcett's disappearance, his son Brian, hoping to keep his father's flame alive, published "Exploration Fawcett" (1953), billed as a collection of the explorer's own writings about his previous adventures. Dr. Lees wonders to what degree Brian Fawcett had a hand in shaping the text, which seemed to anticipate Indiana Jones in its vivid depictions of danger narrowly escaped in exotic locales.

Whatever the provenance of "Exploration Fawcett," it became a seminal scripture of Dr. Lees's childhood as he grew up in the West Riding of Yorkshire in the 1950s. After Dr. Lees's father recommended to him a library copy of the book, the young boy was hooked. "Fawcett challenged me to travel with him to intangible worlds," Dr. Lees recalls, "where everything was connected to everything else and the unfathomable was within reach . . . The evenings that I spent reading Exploration Fawcett were as alive as any I can now remember. It was as if the book had chosen me, rather than the other way round."

As a youngster, Dr. Lees was probably the perfect age to tackle "Exploration Fawcett," with its tall tales of South American odysseys perhaps only a child could fully believe. "He wrote that one night he had been awakened by a jaguar rubbing against his back as it slunk under his hammock," Dr. Lees recalls of his childhood hero. Fawcett speculated that a "huge reptile resembling a brontosaurus" still roamed the Amazon region.

For Dr. Lees, Fawcett promised overseas adventure that seemed tantalizingly in reach. On family trips to the docks of Liverpool, the boy had sensed a larger world. "The ships about to depart, the ships coming in past the sandbar, and the ships passing in the dark all created

indeterminate dreams of voyages,” he tells readers. “Liverpool was an impermanent place of passage, full of silos and stores, simultaneously a space of entrapment and liberation. We felt the pull, but were too afraid to put to sea.”

Fear, a natural impediment to travel, is something that didn't appear to plague Fawcett, who might have fared better if he had at least occasionally heeded the counsel of caution. Ill-prepared for the expedition that turned out to be his last, he seemed almost destined to disappear, along with his son Jack and Jack's friend Raleigh Rimell, while searching for the legendary City of Z.

A grandiose sense of destiny guided the ambitions of Fawcett, who was fascinated by the occult. “He believed,” Dr. Lees writes, “that mankind's hope and destiny lay in the hands of the Earth Guardians or ‘Adepts,’ who inhabited six underground lodges located in continents that had once been home to great civilisations. The lodges extended into the astral plane and were surrounded by an impenetrable wall of mental matter.”

Dr. Lees does a good job of explaining why cultural disillusionment after World War I, along with emerging scientific wonders, made belief in the supernatural more appealing: “If cables could send messages from Europe to America, cameras record images for posterity and x-rays see under the human skin, then why could psychics not communicate with the afterlife and the living dead?”

Dr. Lees's search for meaning ultimately takes him to the Amazon as well, where he finds a considerably more prosaic landscape than the one described in “Exploration Fawcett.” “Neon lights flashed up the names of American hamburger chains and running shoes,” he writes of the Brazilian city of Manaus.

Reality is no match, it seems, for the rapture of existence conveyed in a long-ago book. Dr. Lees's own writing can be such an exercise in enthrallment. He's a memorable stylist, as when he remembers his English childhood: “The whine of the factory sirens and the purring of distant motorcycles on Denton's Green Lane would become my birdsong.”

Other sentences in Dr. Lees's elegy for vanished youth flare up and shimmer with revelation, like lost arrowheads upturned by the plow. Recalling his childhood fascination with the Amazon, he offers a telling confession: “Sometimes I tried to prise open the manhole at the bottom of the street, believing it was the portal to this withheld parallel world.”

In his acknowledgments, Dr. Lees thanks his wife for reminding him “of the importance of intuition, perception and imagination for spiritual development.”

“Brazil That Never Was” is proof, it seems, that he took her advice to heart.

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