John Hemming on Árbol de Ríos: La Historia del Amazonas

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English transcription

I want to start by thanking everyone who made this book possible. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation – which does so much to help good works in Amazonia – did me the honour of saying that they regard my book *Tree of Rivers* as so important that they wanted to pay for its translation into Spanish. They found a superb Limeño translator, Kique Bossio – who bombarded me with hundreds of highly intelligent questions, and wrote elegant prose – and the excellent press of the PUC, with Professor Charles Walker as the enabler. The result is this fine book.

How did I come to write this book? Many decades ago, I spent a year travelling all over this great country, Peru – including its Amazonian selva. I then wrote a book about Pizarro's invasion, *La Conquista de los Incas*. In subsequent years, I was on a series of expeditions to other parts of Amazonia. One of the first was pure exploration, cutting into totally unexplored forests in the heart of Brazil. We consulted the leading experts on indigenous affairs and they assured us that there were no tribal people in those forests. But they were wrong. After three months cutting and mapping, some *indios* (as they were then known) found our trail, laid an ambush on it, and killed with arrows and clubs the first man who walked into this: my best friend from Oxford. He was the last – possibly the first – Englishman ever to be killed by a totally unknown tribe. We embalmed his body deep in the forest, and carried it out, to be flown by the Brazilian Air Force for burial in Rio de Janeiro.

This made me passionately interested in indigenous peoples. So I decided to write a history of *their* conquest, on the eastern side of this continent, to mirror that of the Incas. I spent several years visiting tribal peoples all over Brazil and researching in libraries and

archives. This involved visits to forty-five different indigenous peoples, four of them at the time of their first contact by *sertanista* experts of Brazil's indigenous service Funai. But the conquest of the Amazonian part of South America is still on-going – with perhaps twenty tribal peoples still isolated and uncontacted. Thus, what was intended to be a companion book to *The Conquest of the Incas* turned into three hefty volumes – totalling 2,200 pages!

I became Director of the Royal Geographical Society in London, which led to further expeditions. But these were scientific, including the large Projeto Maracá in northernmost Brazil which I led personally. This involved, over a two-year period, 150 doctoral-level natural scientists and a further 50 *técnico* expert woodsmen. During all these expeditions I was at four times in unexplored places, where no non-indigenous person had previously set foot. All this led to more books.

Then I had the idea of trying to condense the entire history and geography of the Amazon into a single readable, but reasonably scholarly, volume. This is it: *Árbol de Ríos*. I called it this because, from space, the Amazon looks like a gigantic tree, with the main river the tree trunk, and its thousand tributaries the branches and twigs. This name also reflects the two great glories of Amazonia: its trees and its rivers.

I want to begin by reminding you of the sheer size of the Amazon River, because this helps to show why it is so important in global terms.

When a young English botanist, Richard Spruce, first saw the Amazon in 1850 he wrote excitedly to a friend: **'The largest river in the world flows through the largest forest.'**

Spruce was right. The Amazon is far and away the largest river. Of all the fresh water that enters the oceans from all the rivers on earth, almost *one fifth* (seventeen per cent) flows through the Amazon – that's more than from the next eight largest rivers combined. It is also the colossus in the size of its basin – over 7 million square kilometres

which is forty per cent of the South American continent. It has by far the most tributaries, some of which are themselves among the world's greatest rivers. The only superlative still debated is length: some argue that the Nile is longer; but the National Geographic Society accepts that a tiny tributary of the Apurímac that rises near Arequipa makes the Amazon also the world's longest river (and if you allow the Madeira/Mamoré, smaller in volume of flow, its headwater in southern Bolivia is even further from its mouth.)

Another young Englishman who was with Spruce, Henry Walter Bates, was awestruck by his first sight of that stupendous environment. He wrote to his bother in a cascade of enthusiasm: 'The charm and glory of the country are its animal and vegetable productions. How inexhaustible is their study! … It is one dense jungle: the lofty forest trees, of vast variety of species, all lashed and connected by climbers, their trunks covered with a museum of ferns, Tillandrias, Arums, Orchids, &c. The underwood consists mostly of younger trees – great variety of small palms, mimosas, tree-ferns, &c., and the ground is laden with fallen branches – vast trunks covered with parasites, &c.'… [It is] a region which may be fittingly called a Naturalist's Paradise." It is of course by far the richest terrestrial ecosystem on earth, home to millions of species with which we share our planet. (Incidentally, during eleven years of collecting in Amazonia, young Bates sent back specimens of no less than 14,712 different *species* – mostly insects, for he was an entomologist, but also birds, mammals, fish and reptiles. Of these, no less than eight thousand species were new to science! Even Charles Darwin was hugely impressed.)

To many outsiders the Amazon is a daunting jungle, tough, impenetrable, full of dangers and useful only when tamed and destroyed. To others, it is a treasure, a place of incomparable beauty and endless fascination. Not surprisingly, this mighty wilderness has attracted larger-than-life characters. My book is full of their stories – ruthless conquerors, brave explorers, skilled woodsmen, indigenous people living sustainably in harmony with the forests and rivers, adventurers, crazy or incompetent blunderers, cruel

oppressors, wealthy rubber (and robber) barons, Indiana Jones-style archaeologists parting vegetation to discover hidden ruins, outlaws and revolutionaries hiding in the forests, and the many victims of forced labour in this toughest of environments. I do not have time to tell you their stories this evening. But, if you read the book, I doubt whether you will be bored by them!

The history of the Amazon falls into four main periods. The first was the ten thousand years before the arrival of aggressive Europeans and their lethal diseases. Indigenous peoples flourished in a rich tapestry of cultures, art and spirituality, living in harmony with the natural environment of forests and rivers and learning to grow food staples manioc and to some extent maize. There is a debate about how large those pre-Columbian communities were, with Anna Roosevelt taking the high field of very populous chiefdoms, and Betty Meggers the low field of villages that had to remain small. I agreed with both great American scholars – a mistake, because it pleased neither of them! I did this because chiefdoms were located on major rivers, where they could feed big populations from aquatic resources of fish and turtles. But in inter-fluvial forests, villages had to limit their numbers to live sustainably from hunting and limited farming in forest clearings.

The second period is the colonial era and nineteenth century. Amazonia was seen as a hostile environment that yielded almost no commercial attractions. Alien diseases such as measles, smallpox, tuberculosis and influenza decimated extremely healthy native peoples. This was exacerbated by a few thousand Portuguese settlers sending slaving expeditions ever further up the rivers and cruelly denuding them. The great Jesuit Antonio Vieira fulminated, in a sermon, about the iniquity of slavers, who claimed that they were going up the rivers to seek gold for the King. 'The only gold in this captaincy is the red gold drawn from the veins of the Indians!' This was where I got the title '*Red Gold*' for the first volume of my trilogy of books about the history of Brazilian indigenous peoples. An important event during those colonial centuries was the Treaty of Madrid of 1750, which gave the Portuguese most of the forested Amazon basin, so that Brazil

occupies half South America. Using the principle of *uti posseditis*, this Treaty rewarded Portuguese slavers who could so easily move up thousands of kilometres of flat rivers, whereas Spaniards in the rich Inca empire had no incentive to cross the Andes. The other event was the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Portuguese empire in 1759 and Spanish soon after. Some depleted villages passed from control by missionaries to even worse laymen. The best that can be said about the colonial centuries is that there was no environmental damage, apart from the destruction of freshwater turtles and their eggs.

The third era was the rubber boom, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This gigantic bonanza made some barons and their cities ludicrously opulent, but inflicted a tough life on rubber tapppers. Because the main rubber tree *Hevea brasiliensis* was sustainably tapped, the rubber boom caused little environmental damage, and most indigenous peoples escaped by retreating into forests away from the rubber rivers. An exception was the *Castilloa* tree, that grows here in Peru, cannot be tapped but has to be felled, and yields poor-quality caucho latex. The latex rubber baron Julio César Arana had an evil empire on the Putumayo River between Peru and Colombia, and used unspeakable cruelties to force tribal peoples to collect caucho. I regret to say that Arana was Peruvian; but so was the brave journalist Benjamin Saldaña who exposed his atrocities.

The fourth phase, the past half century, is by far the worst. Two inventions, chain saws and earthmoving bulldozers, suddenly made it easy to fell trees and strip the land for roads and settlements. Brazil's military government in 1970 started gouging the Transamazonica and other so-called 'penetration roads' into the precious tropical rain forests. This coincided with a series of profitable reasons for destroying forests: land for settlements; timber from the trees themselves; beef, using imported humped cattle and tough grasses from India; and soya from Japan, the only commercial crop whose nitrogen-fixing qualities mean that it can grow on the weak soils under felled tropical forests, and a beam that happens to be an excellent animal and poultry feed. At the

Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 we were guardedly optimistic, because loggers, cattle ranchers and soya growers seemed to be failing. But we were wrong. Paving the new roads for all-weather use, means that the slaughter-houses and sawmills can get to the produce, and the trucks to remove it operate in all weathers. Because of President Bolsonaro and other profligate regimes, the situation has worsened catastrophically during the fourteen years since I wrote *Tree of Rivers*. I had to rewrite all the recent part of the book before this translation.

There are two good things in our times. One is that hundreds of admirable scientists have learned vastly more about the forest ecosystem and its thousands of species. The other is that every Amazonian nation has created great swathes of protected areas. Brazil led the way, with its 1988 Constitution protecting the territories of some two hundred indigenous peoples. These communal societies are of course perfect custodians of the forests that are central to their cultures. The area conserved by indigenous territories and other protected parks is as great as the entire European Union.

But all Amazonian trees and rivers, protected and privately owned, are severely damaged by the current Brazilian and some other governments. They are not yet demolished. It would threaten the future of life on this planet if they were all to go – in my view a gigantic crime against humanity, worse even than genocide or war.