

# Old worlds for new

Len Goodwin

**Explorers of the Amazon.** By Anthony Smith. Viking: 1990. Pp. 344. £14.99, \$21.95.

**Camping with the Prince and Other Tales of Science in Africa.** By Thomas A. Bass. Houghton Mifflin: 1990. Pp. 304. \$20.95.

THE Amazon, as well as being the world's greatest river, is also the most mysterious. There was no real map of it until recently — and the map changes as the river floods and tributaries alter courses as they think fit.

Exploration has always been a matter of chance and accident, beginning with the discovery of the coast of Brazil in 1500. Pedro Cabral sailed a bit too far west in search of a good wind to take him around Africa on the way to India. He stayed for 12 days — long enough to say Mass and plant a wooden cross — before continuing on the voyage that, at long last, broke the stranglehold of Venice and the Middle East on trade with India. Anthony Smith's essays tell the stories of the adventurers who uncovered the secrets of thousands of miles of river — fascinating tales based on a wide study of contemporary documents and reports.

The Spanish conquistadors had awesome courage and fortitude, matched only by their appalling cruelty, not only to the hapless Indians, but also to their own countrymen. When nothing was left of the Inca empire, the Spaniards sought further plunder from the mythical El Dorado in the river valleys to the East. One of them, Orellana, having been sent downriver in search of food, was unable (or unwilling) to rejoin his brutal leader, Gonzalo Pizarro, and carried on downstream for 3,000 miles to the Amazon's mouth. Seventeen years later, Lope de Aguirre, having murdered his way to the top, followed Orellana, but only because he intended to use the men under his command to reconquer Peru for himself. Exploration from east to west was by Portuguese traders based in Pará (Belém) at the river's mouth — a quiet operation that, despite the old treaty that gave Spain the lion's share, led to the control of half the continent by Portugal.

Chance governed the first scientific exploration of the river by La Condamine. He was sent to Quito by the French Académie des Sciences in 1735, with permission to make measurements to determine whether the Earth was a sphere swollen at the Equator as proposed by Newton, or swollen at the poles as propounded by Cassini. The matter was

settled fairly rapidly in Newton's favour by a second team sent to Lapland at the same time, but La Condamine stayed in the Andes for eight years, his team's activities being complicated by illness, accident, marriage, madness and murder. He decided to return downriver and, with Maldonado, made the first extensive and reliable scientific observations and collections of the Amazon region.

Fifty years later, good luck enabled one of the most competent scientists of the time, Baron von Humboldt, to explore the river. Friends in Madrid with access to the royal family obtained for him a wide-ranging permit to travel and, quite suddenly, the whole of Spanish America was



Aerial view of a river meandering through the Oriente rainforest of the Amazon.

opened to someone entirely suited to take advantage of a brand new world.

The South American monopolies on quinine and rubber were broken by the clandestine removal of *Cinchona* and *Hevea* seeds and plants by the British to grow in plantations in India and Malaya. But the transport to Kew of thousands of rubber seedlings succeeded only because fraud had led to the loss of the intended cargo of a liner that happened to call — and the hold was empty.

The final, horrific tale in the collection concerns the cruel Arana empire on the Putumayo, tributary to the Amazon, where thousands of Indians were held in slavery to produce rubber to send to the boom town of Manaus. The company nominally in charge was based in London and, with the help of Roger Casement (then British consul-general in Rio, but later hanged for high treason in 1916), an American, Walter Hardenberg, exposed the scandal.

Thomas Bass has written a travel book of quite another kind. An American, hooked on Africa as a teenager in 1968 and feeling the uneasy fit between contemporary politics and traditional life, he returned in 1985 and spent two years accompanying scientific expeditions from Timbuktu to the Zambesi River. He had learned to enjoy travelling with scientists because they “pay attention . . . know the names of things . . . ask intelligent

questions . . . and the best are both critical and self-critical”.

The title derives from a rather unhappy visit by the Duke of Edinburgh, as president of the World Wildlife Fund, to a unit studying the complex changes in natural vegetation, crop yields and fishing at the inland delta of the Nile in Mali, on the edge of the Sahara. In Nairobi, Bass accompanied the energetic Kenyan director of the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology in a tour of units seeking to control insect pests by biological methods — predators, parasites and traps — to avoid further damage to the environment by outworn insecticides. He dived into Lake Malawi to observe the breeding

habits of cichlid fishes, surveyed the calamities resulting from the application of European and American farming methods to the thin soils of Africa, and camped with Turkana nomads who, although they know better than anyone how to survive in an unpredictable climate, are now having to deal with the chaos caused by politics and civil warfare, to which they have no life-saving response. Bass also accompanied expeditions to dig up bones and stone implements in the Western Rift valley, and to collect blood from people and animals in a virus survey near the Bussa dam in Nigeria.

Racy, informative, and with much of the text as spoken dialogue, Bass's stories highlight the often disastrous effects of ignoring local knowledge and practices; the continent is “littered with White Elephants — the bleaching bones of animals and aid projects alike”. Nevertheless, the author believes in an African counterthrust working against entropic doom and a movement, informed by traditional knowledge and resourcefulness, working for the common good. An interesting, thoughtful book by a sympathetic listener with a feel for the country and its peoples, and the ability, in a swift phrase, to bring up the sights, sounds and smells of Africa. □

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