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The Amazon: Land Without History

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commentary on his colonial-era birth certificate, on which are inscribed the words: “George Mentore, Black, Native of British Guiana.” The rest of the book can be read as an impassioned protest against the categorical indignities meted out—in the name of civilization—by state powers on subject peoples the world over, and as a resounding affirmation of the possibility of a form of life that overturns everything the offending certificate stands for. Perhaps that is why, whenever comparisons are drawn, they are almost always between the Waiwai and the capitalist West rather than with neighboring Amazonian peoples (about which we learn surprisingly little, despite much evidence of coming and going), or with indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. Invariably, too, if not unreasonably, the West comes out in an unfavorable light. Having begun with an account of bureaucratic heartlessness and insensitivity, the book ends with an unashamedly romantic and erotic tale of young love. The tale has a happy ending. Waiwai beauty triumphs over the ugliness of the modern state: the complementarity of bodies that run into one another trumps the categorical logic of partition and individuation. This is, indeed, a joyful and life-affirming book. Yet it is an affirmation curiously at odds with the objectifications of its theory.

The Amazon: Land Without History. Euclides da Cunha (translation by Ronald Sousa of *À margem da história* (1909), with an introduction by Lúcia Sá). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 96 pp., introduction, maps, bibliography, index. \$39.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper). ISBN 0195172051, 0195172043. [www.oup.com]

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In 1905 Euclides da Cunha led a Brazilian mission to define the boundaries between his country and Peru, in Acre which Brazil had just acquired from Bolivia. The international team sailed up the Purus River to its headwaters, and this first glimpse of the rubber-rich Amazonian forests made a profound impression on the young Cunha. He was already famous for his first book, *Os sertões* (translated as *Rebellion in the Backlands* by Samuel Putnam in 1944) about the Canudos rebellion in north-east Brazil. He planned to write a long book on the Amazon and started by publishing seven essays—which form this book. He was killed, by his wife’s lover, in 1909. But Euclides da Cunha has always enjoyed cult status in Brazil.

To a modern reader, Cunha’s writing is anachronistic. He was a patriotic official, writing at a time when all western nations were at the height of their imperialistic ambitions. The young republic of Brazil was no exception. Its

manifest destiny was to occupy half South America, acquired in the Treaty of Madrid and subsequent negotiations, and Cunha delighted in this expansion. But there is nothing in these essays about the amazing diversity of Amazonia's flora and fauna, almost total silence about indigenous peoples, and no mention of the rich cultural heritage of caboclos and ribeirinhos.

The strength of *Land Without History* is its description of the rubber boom at its peak. Cunha's sympathies were with the oppressed seringueiros, particularly those who had had to flee from Brazil's drought-stricken northeast. He described how a rubber tapper was trapped in debt-bondage from the moment he left Ceará. His passage up the river and basic necessities were advanced to him on credit, but at grotesquely inflated prices. To work rubber he got: "one large funnel jar, one basin, a thousand small bowls, an iron axe, a saber, a Winchester carbine and two hundred bullets, two plates, two spoons, two cups, two pots, a coffee pot, two spools of linen thread, and a needle case. Just those things and nothing more." As he neared his rubber trail, he was advanced three months' supply of food—just enough to survive, and again at exorbitant prices. Cunha wrote that the greenhorn seringueiro entered "the diabolical paradise of the rubber tracts" and "within the exuberant climes of the rubber-producing trees there awaits him the most heinous organization of labor ever conjured up by human egotism unbound."

The editor of this first English version of the essays charitably says that they were "brilliantly translated into Victorian English." I'm not so sure. In the description of a seringueiro's basic equipment quoted above, the translator should have made it clear that the "large funnel jar" was the kiln for smoking rubber with creosote, that the "thousand small bowls" were tin cups attached to rubber trees to collect latex, and that the 'saber' is more commonly called a machete. Cunha's prose was often pompous, but the translator could have done better than this passage (about malaria forests): "[A] frightening and tragic retrospective picture is drawn out in an imaginative recitation of sorrows. And day after day the nature accursed by that man keeps reappearing in that place before misled imaginations, as though in it the classical locus of misery and death were being staked out."

Indigenous peoples appear only in the essay "The caucheros," about Peruvian collectors of caucho from *Castilloa* trees. Here Cunha contrasts the battered peoples of the Purus in Brazil with those in the remote headwaters inside Peru. The Paumari and Ipurinã are 'ever decreasing in numbers' and the Tacuna are "born looking old, so much is the decrepitude of their race reflected in their stunted aspect." By contrast, the "singular savages" of the upper rivers are better physical specimens, headed by "the corpulent Mashcos of the Manú . . . of giant size . . . , and supplanting them in valor and renown, the warlike Campas of the Urubamba." There is a glimpse of atrocities against Indians—as was being perpetrated at that time by Julio Cesar Arana on the Putumayo. He met a cauchero who had a 'scandalous harem' obtained by "criminal trafficking" which

included “the enchanting Facunda with huge, savage, and dreamy eyes, who cost him 100 soles.” Not much of value to anthropologists here. Nor is there anything of interest to historians in Cunha’s forays into Amazonian history, and still less to geographers in his thinking about river hydrology. In the final essay “Transacreana” he suggested a railway across Acre, roughly along the route of the BR-364 road built seventy years after his death. Of greater interest were his proposals for legislation to protect seringueiros from exploitation. The rubber (robber) barons brushed these aside, ridiculing Euclides da Cunha as ignorant and demented—and for using convoluted prose.