

Balancing the Books

The Incredible River

By Father John S. Kennedy

Ever since its discovery in 1499, the Amazon River has dazzled the imagination of men. It is a prodigious phenomenon. With a thousand tributaries, it is 20-8 miles wide at its mouth, its volume exceeds that of the eight great rivers of Asia put together, and one of the islands in its mouth is the same in size as Switzerland.

Robin Furneaux writes about the river in "The Amazon" (Putnam, \$6.95), which treats some of the principal episodes in its history, beginning with a Spanish sailing captain's chancing upon it just seven years after Columbus first touched the New World.

It was not until half a century later that any European traversed the whole river. This feat was performed by Francisco Orellana, who was leading part of an expedition in search of the fabled treasure of El Dorado. His point of departure was Quito, on the west coast of South America.

In the next hundred years, there were many expeditions to the Amazon. Considerable exploration was done, and colonies were set up by the English, the French, the Dutch, as well as by the Spanish and the Portuguese who divided the continent between them. But it was only the two latter that remained in the Amazon country.

By 1750, the Jesuits who had genuinely helped communities in the whole Amazon area, included some 250,000 Indians in their settlement. But the days of these foundations were numbered. Spaniards and Portuguese who opposed such benevolence toward the Indians, secured the Jesuits' expulsion.

What followed for the Indians is best illustrated by the history of the boom and bust in rubber which came in the 19th and 20th Centuries. The rubber tree of the Amazon valley was discovered in the 18th Century but it was not until 1888 (with the invention of the rubber tire for carriages and bicycles) that a tremendous demand for the Amazon rubber, unique in quality and quantity, began, to swell much more with the coming of the automobile.

While the boom lasted, it brought vast wealth to some people, but indescribable misery to the Amazon Indians. For they were atrociously exploited. Pressed into work as tappers of the trees, they were paid almost nothing, and that little had to go for the barest necessities, which were sold to them at fantastically inflated prices. They were beaten, mutilated, put to death for failure to produce the quotas their masters demanded.

The collapse of the market for the wild rubber of the Amazon came with the development of cultivated rubber plantations in, for example, the Dutch East Indies and Malaya, and by 1915 the South American rubber had few buyers. "In 1892," writes Viscount Furneaux, "Brazil accounted for 61 per cent of the world's trade in rubber. . . Now she cannot even produce enough for her own requirements."

And the Indians? In Brazil alone, there were probably about a million of them at the time of conquest. Today, the number is 75,000, and some experts say that the entire race is in danger of extinction.

After all this time, the Amazon area remains untamed. At staggering cost in lives and money, a railroad was inched through the jungle in one section; it has never amounted to much. A road has finally been

constructed from Belem, at the river's mouth, to a town 2,500 miles away. Manganese ore has been discovered, and there are some signs of improved living conditions in the mining town. There are plans for other industries. The potential, in raw materials, is immeasurable. But progress is sure to be laggard.

Viscount Furneaux has sketched his gigantic subject deftly. All he gives, as he realizes, is but a skipping outline of the stunning complexity of the Amazon. But that is worth having.

Another sort of complexity concerns Harry Mark Petrakis in his family memoir, "Stelmark" (McKay, \$4.95). Mr. Petrakis, well-known for his fiction, is the son of a Greek

Orthodox priest. He was born in this country, a few years after his father and mother and their older children left Crete to settle in Missouri.

Settle is hardly the word, for the father moved from parish to parish, in more than one state, before beginning a long stay in Chicago. It was in that city that Mr. Petrakis grew up, in an ethnic neighborhood which clung to the traditions and ways of the old country.

He lets us sample the flavor and color of that Greek enclave, and he depicts the trials of adaptation to the general environment, different in so many particulars. Thus, he attended a parochial school attached to his father's church, while just across the street (although far away in some respects) was a Roman Catholic parochial school most of whose pupils were black.

He is frank about some of the seamier aspects of adolescence, and unsparing in his account of his gambling mania and his careering from job to job as he sought to become a writer. His initial success in the medium brings the book to a close.

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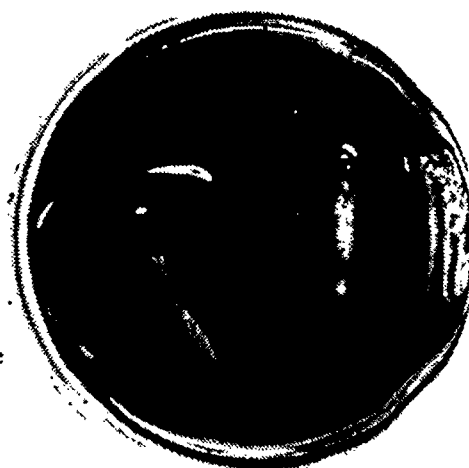
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