

BOOK REVIEW

Davis, Wade (1996). *One River: Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazon Rain Forest*. New York: Simon and Schuster. \$27.50. 537 pp., maps, photographs, biblio., index. ISBN: 0-684-80886-2.

I maintain distinctions between adventure travelers who court hardship and danger as ends in themselves and those who do fieldwork, enduring difficulties that might arise during the course of a learning project, eyes and mind wide open. *One River* is a salute to fieldwork. "A lumberjack from British Columbia who has walked the Darien gap," Wade Davis (457) proves his place in the second category with this book. As well, he more than proves his skill as a writer and a researcher.

One River is two accounts of ethnobotanical explorations in South America. Under the guidance of Harvard ethnobotanist Richard Schultes, Davis traveled extensively in Latin America exploring for plants in the 1970s and 80s. Later, Davis traveled in South America for fifteen months with another Schultes student, Tim Plowman. *One River* is an account of these travels. It is also a biographical account of Schultes' years of fieldwork in South America. Intertwined, the two narratives are Davis' tribute to both men and their work. It is also a very interesting account of South America, especially the Amazon basin.

Richard Schultes came from a modest conservative Boston family and he entered Harvard in 1933 with plans to become a doctor but, by coincidence, he fell under the influence of botanist Oakes Ames. With pharmacological plants as his major interest, he would subsequently spend over twelve years doing ethnobotanical fieldwork in the forests and savannas of northern South America, Mexico, and the American West, the bulk of it in the Amazon. Davis shows the conservative Harvard man tripping on mushrooms, peyote and natural manifestations of LSD as perfectly normal. In fact, a running theme throughout the book is that "the use of any drug is firmly rooted in culture" (241). He might have added that constraints against the use of others are just as culturally rooted.

Laying out the book in a back-and-forth between narratives of his fieldwork and Schultes' fieldwork, Davis, author of *The Serpent and The Rainbow* (1985), succeeds at describing the past and the present in contexts of one another. Based on both exhaustive archival research and interviews (and the obvious fieldwork) the narrative that Davis weaves is powerfully effective, particularly at illustrating a changing South America over time (the changes can be startling), as well as an academic lineage in progress. We see a hungry Schultes paddling a dugout canoe for days to reach a specific river drainage, enduring the effects of malaria and beriberi as simply a necessary inconvenience. Then we see Davis and Plowman, thirty years later, in similar situations, often in the same places, seeking out the same plants, taking the same hallucinogenic trips.

One River is a popular account. Technical terms and foreign language typically are translated. Theory is largely absent. However, there is plenty to think about. Deforestation, colonial atrocities, the impacts of multinational corporations in small, remote places, and the dying of languages and whole cultures are a few of the myriad issues Davis touches on. As an account of field experiences (and also surely because of Davis' anthropological training), insightful observations of the people Davis and Schultes encountered fill the book's pages. To my mind, one of its biggest successes is to remind us that different people think about and see the world differently. In one illustrative passage, Davis and anthropologist Jim Yost are exploring the forest with the Waorani, a tribe whom the outside world -- represented here by the missionary front -- reached only two generations ago. Superb naturalists with a deep understanding [end p. 157] of the forest and its creatures, the Waorani often could not give Davis a name for a particular plant "for every part -- roots, fruit, leaves, bark -- had its own name" (276). Nevertheless, the Waorani are avid consumers of the forest, with no conservation ethic as we imagine one to be. They simply take what they can get, especially enjoying newfound resources like dynamite and DDT to help them fish the rivers. Yost, who lived among them for years, explained it to Davis (294) thus:

Nothing thrills the Waorani more than killing game and cutting down big trees. It's what so many people don't understand who haven't lived in the forest. You don't have to conserve what you don't have the power to destroy. Harming the forest is an impossible concept for them. The fact that they use every part of an animal has nothing to do with a conservation ethic, and everything to do with hunger. They don't know what it means to destroy? They have no capacity to understand. In a world of such abundance, the word "scarcity" has no meaning. It's what makes them most vulnerable. It's the same with their culture. When you've lived in complete isolation, how can you understand what it means to lose a culture? It's not until it is almost gone and when people become educated that they realize what's being lost. By then the attractions of the new way are overpowering, and the only people who want the old ways are the ones who never lived it.

The geographical component -- human and physical, contemporary and historical -- of *One River* is thick and pervasive. For those with interests in the relationships between humans and plants, this book is a must. Although they are not official geographers, the ethnobotany of all three major figures, Schultes, Davis, and Plowman, is indeed geographic. For instance, the main theme of Davis' and Plowman's fieldwork is the search for the source area or domestication hearth of coca (*Erythroxylum sp.*), a project reminiscent of a whole branch of cultural geography in the United States.

Schultes' work on the rubber tree (*Hevea sp.*) is another of *One River's* geography-laden subjects. Akin to Hecht and Cockburn (1990), Davis recounts the history of rubber production, providing an insightful context for Schultes' government work seeking geographical variations among *Hevea* throughout the Amazon to help develop a blight resistant population for plantations in the Americas. As Davis explains, the synthetic rubber industry has yet to replace natural rubber and, thus, the bureaucratic decision to end the rubber program (an archive uncovered by Davis) and destroy its work leaves the dangers inherent in the diffusion of the leaf blight to South East Asia with us today. Beyond this book, much of Schultes' knowledge of *Hevea* remains unpublished. Much more exists only in his mind.

As the book is rather long and covers so many topics, so many plants, cultures, and places, its academic utility may be somewhat limited. Citations are few. However, the "Notes on Sources" section provides a healthy list of the sources Davis used, as well as useful references for further reading on a wide array of topics. For class or research use, specific chapters may prove very useful. Though the writing is excellent, coverage of particular topics may not be exhaustive but neither is it intended to be.

As a geographer, I found the dearth of maps a drawback. Though filled with 38 excellent photographs, most by Schultes, the book only has three maps in over 500 pages. Although this is three more than some of the work being put out by some geographers today, several large-scale maps would enhance the extensive and detailed accounts of the many specific areas Davis writes about. Though I am aware that this is also a reflection of my limited knowledge, I found myself running to the atlas more than a few times.

If you are one for rigid organization or "plot," this book may frustrate you. The major theme is two historical, biographical accounts of fieldwork, accented by vivid descriptions of drug-induced hallucinations. Davis switches constantly from Schultes' work to his and Plowman's work, as well as diverging into historical accounts of various contextual material—missionaries, rubber exploitation, colonialism, and the history of coca and cocaine in both Inca and contemporary world culture, to name but a few. I found these **[end p. 158]** divergences useful, informative, and welcome but, again, they may frustrate others.

Wade Davis is an excellent writer and I found *One River* to be extremely stimulating. With multiple training in anthropology, biology, and ethnobotany, Davis is adept at providing interesting insight into numerous encounters and historical events. Though a popular account, this book is not to be dismissed lightly. At a time when interdisciplinary considerations are becoming more common, this synthesis of several perspectives along with good writing may be a good model for future research presentations, both in

geography and without.

REFERENCES:

Davis, Wade (1985). *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Hecht, S. and A. Cockburn (1990). *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers, and Defenders of the Amazon*. New York: HarperCollins.

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**Joby Bass**

*Department of Geography*

*University of Texas*

*Austin, Texas 78712*

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