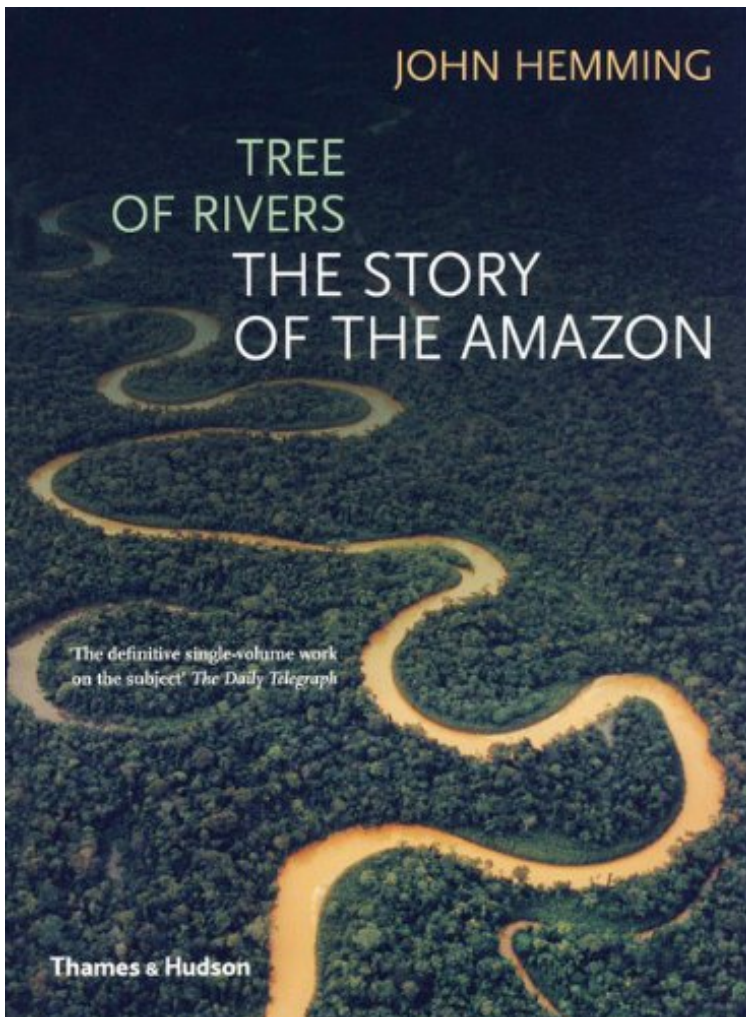


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Tree of Rivers: The Story of the Amazon



Par John Hemming
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteuria contains by far the world's largest river and the greatest expanse of tropical rain forest, home to the greatest biological diversity on the planet. This enthralling book brilliantly explains why the rain forest is crucial for our planet's survival, and vividly describes the passionate struggles that have taken place to utilize, protect and understand it. John Hemming's thrilling account recalls the adventures and misadventures of intrepid explorers, Jesuits and the rubber barons who enslaved thousands of Indians. It also tells of nineteenth-century botanists, humanitarians and advocates for Indian rights, as well as the archaeologists and anthropologists who have uncovered the secrets of early man here. Hemming also describes the 's flora, fauna and natural beauty, all now under threat as the forests are destroyed to feed our appetite for timber, beef and soya.From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com ed by Edgardo KrebsIn "Atlas," a book about travel, Jorge Luis Borges wrote that we should not assume all discoveries and explorations to be things of the past. No place can justify this assertion more literally than the basin. Dominated by the longest river in the world, its geography extends over a surface the size of

Europe, much of it inaccessible. The river is the center of a web of life -- plants, insects, fish, reptiles, birds, mammals -- dauntingly richer than any other region's on Earth. Its rainforests also serve as home or refuge to a resilient diversity of Indian groups, some of whom, in dwindling numbers, still refuse contact with the larger world, the maker and narrator of history. Yet, this impressive list of attributes can also lure us to imagine the in mythical terms, or to misrepresent it or take it for granted. The stories John Hemming tells in *Tree of Rivers* are a passionate corrective to many stereotypes of this complex area and its history. An explorer, former director of the Royal Geographical Society and author of three scholarly books on the as well as one on the conquest of Peru, Hemming has dedicated a lifetime of research to the and knows his vast topic with a rigorous intimacy. The book has 11 chapters, spanning a range of historical periods and subjects, from the little publicized (but engrossing) archaeology of the region to present-day problems of deforestation and climate change. Each chapter is a self-contained essay. Taken together, they read like the *Thousand and One Nights* of the , a rich, multifaceted narrative that strives to mirror the place itself. Some stories will be familiar to the informed reader. The first navigation of the , for instance, undertaken by Francisco de Orellana in 1542, was "one of the greatest explorations of all time" in Hemming's judgment, a tropical match for Shackleton's Antarctic odyssey. The voyage was chronicled by the Dominican friar Gaspar de Carvajal, who lost an eye in a skirmish with Indians and survived the strike of an arrow that pierced his ribs. Carvajal's report was the first panoramic portrait of the and the Indians who lived on the banks of the watery maze. Carvajal described the populous villages of the Omagua, for instance, whose glazed, enameled and "vividly colored" pottery he judged as "the finest in the world." Hemming also speculates that the tall, pale female warriors Orellana claimed to have seen were, in fact, long-haired Wai Wai men, "Carib-speaking peoples who now live several days' journey up the Mapuera and Trombetas rivers." Another familiar story is that of the infamous Basque soldier Lope de Aguirre, a brooding member of the Pedro de Ursa expedition, who made his way down the in 1560. Hemming is not partial to the Werner Herzog/Klaus Kinski film "Aguirre, the Wrath of God," which recounts this feverish, failed search for El Dorado. But the madness and mayhem that took over the traveling party is a fitting topic for German expressionism, and madness itself is one of the recurring human shadows cast over the landscape of the . As all these expeditions floated downstream on precarious canoes, their soldiers, priests and adventurers kept a notary's eye on things, drafting and signing documents addressed to the king of Spain every time murder or an act of treason occurred. They knew that their ultimate fate would be decided at court. For the Indians of the , the encounter with Europeans was devastating from the beginning. In 1556, Spanish settlers in the Peruvian hamlet of Chachapoyas "were amazed by the arrival of a flotilla of indigenous canoes" carrying around 300 Indians -- survivors of a party that had walked and paddled up stream for 10 years to flee the Portuguese colonies on the Atlantic coast. The tree of rivers became a net for trapping Indians and conveying them to the coast and to settlements upriver. The settlements were run mercilessly as systems of production with native men, women and children providing expendable slave labor. "A few thousand colonists," Hemming states, "gradually destroyed every human being along thousands of kilometers of the main river and its tributaries." Some of the episodes he recounts -- the burning of entire villages, the raping of women in front of their children -- are reminiscent of the experiences of present-day villagers in Darfur. These were the precursors of the Belgian King Leopold's brutal operatives in the Congo. In the 17th century, in the Mato Grosso of Brazil, that heart of darkness belonged to Antnio Raposo Tavares, "the toughest of all the slavers operating out of the distant southern town of Sao Paulo." Other characters, much less known, such as Curt Nimuendaj and Colonel Cndido Rondon, illustrate the loftier aspects of human nature. Rondon was Theodore Roosevelt's guide in the almost deadly (for Roosevelt) River of Doubt expedition. An orphan and descendant of Bororo Indians, Rondon was, in Hemming's estimation, "Brazil's most intrepid explorer," that country's "answer to Dr. David Livingstone." Rondon surveyed and mapped an enormous swath of unknown territory and then published a series of reports of great ethnographic value. He became an advocate for Indian rights, founded the Indian Protection Service, and admonished his urban audiences to "tremble with indignation and shame" at the genocidal slaughter of the native population. "Die if you must, but never kill" was his advice to "men confronting hostile tribes." Nimuendaj, on the other hand, was born Curt Unkel, in Jena, Germany. Fascinated by South American Indians since childhood, he immigrated, penniless, to Brazil in 1903. He is probably one of the most admirable anthropologists in history. His technique was to spend as much time as possible with a tribe, learn its language and thoroughly document its way of life. He authored monographs on 45 tribes. "Perhaps because he was self-taught," Hemming remarks wryly, "he wrote in jargon-free prose." The Guarani gave him the name Nimuendaj ("He who resides among us"),

which he adopted as his legal name when he became a Brazilian citizen. The , in the collective imagination, is a synonym for nature. One shortcoming in Hemming's narrative is his failure to note that Indians have a completely different way of understanding this concept -- or lack anything resembling it. The French ethnologist Claude Lvi-Strauss (who will turn 100 this November) was the first to systematize the complex intellectual heritage of ian Indians. He famously wrote: "Indians use animals to think." Conservationists, who rightly abhor the prospect of invaluable rainforest being replaced by soybean plantations stretching to the horizon, pin their hopes on government protected areas and Indian stewardship. Yet they may not always acknowledge that Indians and biologists operate within different taxonomies, and do not see "nature" eye-to-eye. The modernist Brazilian writers and painters of the 1920s realized that new symbols were needed to understand the country's hybrid history and culture. "Tupi or not Tupi?" asked the poet-polemicist Olegario Andrade in his *Cannibal Manifesto*, capturing the spirit of the moment. Turning the negative European perceptions of Tupi cannibalism on its head, Andrade suggested that Brazilians would achieve a true sense of nation only when they embraced their indigenous ancestry and, in a metaphorical cannibal feast, ate the world. Hemming does not engage in such symbolic and psychological questions. *Tree of Rivers* is a straightforward, majestic narrative, told in many voices, with a multitude of characters, and composed by a scholar and explorer who has earned a rightful place in the history of the region. Copyright 2008, The Washington Post. All Rights Reserved. *Prsentation de l'diteuria* contains by far the world's largest river and the greatest expanse of tropical rain forest, home to the greatest biological diversity on the planet. This enthralling book brilliantly explains why the rain forest is crucial for our planet's survival, and vividly describes the passionate struggles that have taken place to utilize, protect and understand it. John Hemming's thrilling account recalls the adventures and misadventures of intrepid explorers, Jesuits and the rubber barons who enslaved thousands of Indians. It also tells of nineteenth-century botanists, humanitarians and advocates for Indian rights, as well as the archaeologists and anthropologists who have uncovered the secrets of early man here. Hemming also describes the 's flora, fauna and natural beauty, all now under threat as the forests are destroyed to feed our appetite for timber, beef and soya.