

LOCAL STUDIES EDUCATION SERIES

PERCY FAWCETT

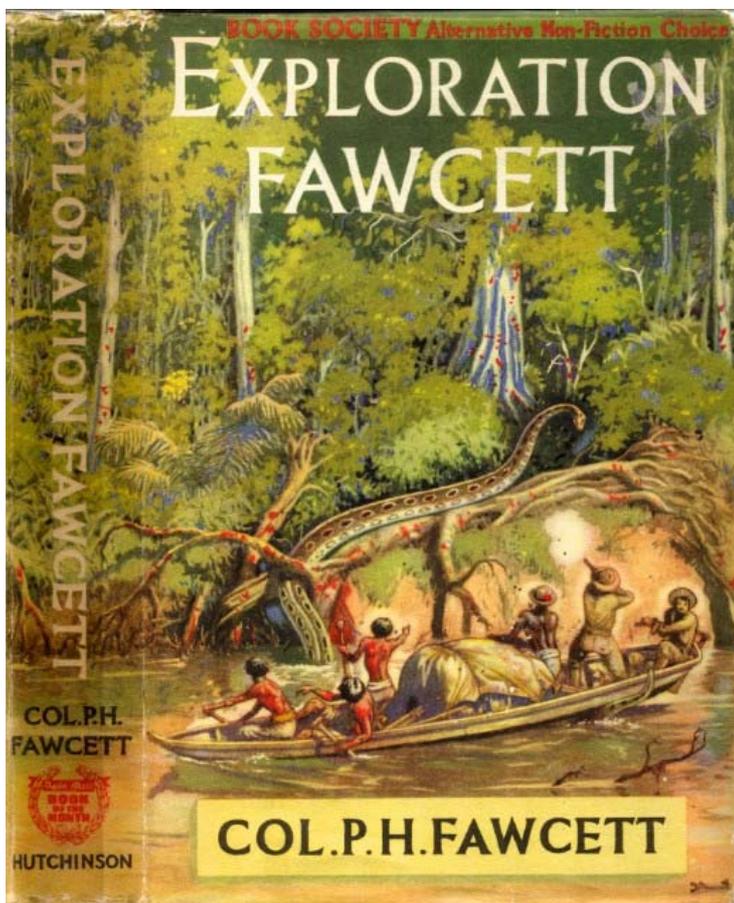


THE LOST EXPLORER
(1867 – c 1925)

Percy Fawcett (1867 – c 1925)

Lieutenant-Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett DSO was an artillery officer, archaeologist and South American explorer. Born in Torquay, on 31 August 1867, at the Villa Devonia, (later demolished and now the site of Shirley Towers, Vane Hill Road), Fawcett was educated at Newton Abbot College, then given a commission in the Royal Artillery at the age of 19. He became a spy for the secret service in North Africa and served for many years in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), where he developed an interest in archaeology, before leaving the army to take up exploration on behalf of the Royal Geographical Society. Fawcett made seven expeditions to South America between 1906 and 1924 – interrupted by the Great War when he volunteered to lead an artillery brigade in France for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). His marriage to Nina Paterson produced a daughter

and two sons. The eldest child Jack was with his father when they disappeared under unexplained circumstances during an expedition searching for an ancient lost city in the uncharted jungles of Brazil in 1925. Percy Fawcett's manuscripts and documents were later compiled by his younger son Brian and published in the best-selling book *Exploration Fawcett* (1953).



The Search for the Lost City of Z



Lieutenant-Colonel Percy Fawcett DSO

Percy Fawcett made his final journey to South America in 1924, accompanied by his son Jack, who also took along his best friend Raleigh Rimmell. Their aim was to search for what Fawcett termed the 'Lost City of Z' – a mythical civilisation referred to by Spanish conquistadors as 'El Dorado'. Fawcett had become convinced, through reading ancient legends and historical records, that Z must lie somewhere in the Matto Grosso region of Brazil. However, nothing more was heard from the three men after journeying deep into the jungle

and dismissing the native guides on 29 May 1925.

During the following decades, various searches, including two led by Fawcett's youngest son Brian, were unsuccessfully mounted to trace the missing explorers. It is estimated that 100 would-be-rescuers died in more than thirteen expeditions sent to discover Fawcett's fate. Rumours emerged that Fawcett's party had been killed by cannibals. In one of his last letters written before he left this country for Rio, Fawcett revealed that he was concerned about the dangers of his mission and the effect that failure might have on his loved ones at their home in Stoke Canon near Exeter: 'Physical death has no real terrors for me. I only am anxious about the family – and I know if I fail it probably means death'.



Percy Fawcett's wife, Nina

Fawcett in Fiction and Film

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle acknowledged that his friend Percy Fawcett was the inspiration for the character Professor Challenger in his novel *The Lost World* (1912). The first of several film adaptations of the book starred Wallace Beery and was produced for the silent screen during the year that Percy Fawcett disappeared - 1925.

The Cruise of the Condor (1933), one of W.E. Johns' stories about fictional pilot and adventurer Biggles, was inspired by Fawcett's search for the Lost City of Z. A screenplay entitled *Find Colonel Fawcett* evolved into a safari spoof starring Bing Crosby and Bob Hope in the comedy movie *Road to Zanzibar* (1941). Then came *Manhunt in the Jungle* (1958), featuring James Wilson as Percy Fawcett, a dramatized account of American George Dynot's real-life search for the missing explorer in 1927.

Percy Fawcett has been proposed as the main inspiration for the hero of the successful adventure series starring Harrison Ford as 'Indiana Jones'. A spin-off series of novels written by Rob McGregor features a story where Jones locates and joins forces with Percy Fawcett in *Indiana Jones and the Seven Veils* (1991). Director Pete Docter confirmed that Percy Fawcett was the main inspiration for the character Charles F. Munz (voiced by actor Christopher Plummer) the antagonist in the computer-animated comedy-drama *Up* released by Walt Disney Pictures and nominated for five Academy Awards in 2009.

Hollywood superstar Brad Pitt produced a big budget movie, *The Lost City of Z* in 2016 starring Charlie Hunnam and Sienna Miller as Percy and Nina Fawcett. The film is based on David Grann's 2009 best-seller of the same name – published with the cooperation of Percy Fawcett's grand-daughter Rolette de Montet-Guerin - who gave the author access to the explorer's logbooks and diaries. These are now housed in the Torquay Museum collection.

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