

Green Devils

THE JUNGLE AND THE DAMNED.
By Hassoldt Davis. New York:
Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 306 pp. \$4.50.

By JOHN W. VANDERCOOK

HASSOLDT Davis is a hardy survivor of an almost vanished breed. Even before the planet was half-hidden behind Curtains, the distant roads became worse cluttered by visa requirements than they had ever been by forest vines, and the cost of living uncomfortably soared higher than the price of staying home, there was little agreement as to what that breed should be called. In the "trade" members of the roving band were described as "travel writers." Interviewers from the evening papers used the kindlier term "explorers."

Mr. Davis in "The Jungle and the Damned" protests: "Most true explorers never called themselves this. [Explorer] was an untidy term with vagueness around the edges. But there were many like me who had to accept it, because of wanderings into little-known or unknown places, with a smattering of ethnology, an awareness of directions, an unusual appetite for fresh air and, above all, an insatiable curiosity to look around corners and over ridges and horizons and through the chinks in curtained windows."

The little-known place of Mr. Davis's latest wandering, in working partnership with a miraculously durable and even-tempered Mrs. Davis, was the now technically abolished but still demonic prison colony of French Guiana, forever incorrectly labeled in the minds of readers of Sunday supplements as Devil's Island. The "unknown" was the grim Guiana hinterland.

Their mission was the making of a film. With enormous difficulty Mrs. Davis, who is an expert photographer, made it. It should be worth seeing.

Mr. Davis wrote this book. Much of it, internal evidence suggests, was written as he went along. That makes for truth. Even the most skeptical will find no romancing. In that harsh, hard, resistant land there was no need for it, even were Hassoldt Davis not an honest man. But the method also has its disadvantages.

Adventurer Davis served during the war with the Free French forces and emerged a beribboned captain.

John W. Vandercook, writer and radio commentator, has made several explorations in regions of Dutch Guiana, Liberia, and the South Pacific.

That gave him entrée to France's shameful and long-secret colony. Yet there were maddening delays. Granting that frustrations, in the shape of everyone and everything from indolent officials and sulky Indians to log-clogged creeks and boiling rapids, are as much a part of travel in the deep tropics as sweat, high joy, and sometimes almost intolerable despair, the nagging question remains how much they should be a part of book-making.

In "The Jungle and the Damned" the result of so much truth-telling is, I think, a tale of hardihood, of living strangeness which should be savored slowly; a *marché aux puces* of a book not all good, but full of good things for the selective shopper.

Certainly it is fascinating to get it straight at last that Devil's Island—the real Devil's Island—is a tiny dab of land, long a kind of demi-paradise for only the most aristocratic felons; to learn that the most precious possession of France's transported thieves and murderers in that sweltering place, is a heavy blanket, for that alone is truly theirs; and that some of them seek solitary confinement, for only there in a numbered, nameless hell may the "damned" nourish their lost identities. For perhaps less morbid tastes, better still are such proofs of man's marvelous variety as Mr. Davis's description of the wild river he and his wife followed almost to its source.

Best is the reminder "The Jungle and the Damned" offers that our lately much criticized planet is still far from being altogether shrunken or orderly or tame. And that there remain people divinely foolish enough to risk their necks and fortunes looking over those "ridges and horizons," as Mallory said before he died on Everest, for the sole and perfect reason that "they're there."



Hassoldt Davis—"tale of living strangeness."

Huge Watershed

EXPLORATION OF THE VALLEY OF THE AMAZON. By William L. Herndon. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. 201 pp. \$2.75.

SECRET CITIES OF OLD SOUTH AMERICA. By Harold T. Wilkins. New York: Library Publishers. 468 pp. \$6.

By VICTOR W. VON HAGEN

THESE two books have only one thing in common—their milieu; they are both set in South America. Although both deal in great measure with the verdured wastes of the Amazon, Herndon's diary is the personal narrative of the first North American to descend the Amazon, the other (by Wilkins) is an *olla podrida* of history, anecdotes, and a handling of phenomena in so obviously fraudulent a manner one wonders how any publisher could have the nerve to publish it.

Herndon's narrative is simple, interesting, and instructive. Virginia-born and a naval officer, William Lewis Herndon (not to be confused with Lincoln's biographer), after service on warships, was assigned to the Charts and Instruments Section of the Hydrographic Office. This preparation was to serve him well for his next assignment. In 1850 he was ordered, along with Midshipman Lardner Gibson, to undertake a "most important and delicate duty: information on the navigability of the Amazon river" along with observations on its "undeveloped commercial resources." They climbed the Andes from Lima (Henry Meiggs had not yet begun his "rail-line to the moon"), and having gained the heights, the expedition separated. Herndon with his companions went north, followed the upper Amazon rivers until they reached the great river. Gibson took a more circuitous route, going south along the Andes, through Peru, Bolivia, thence down the Rio Maderia, and into the Amazon. Both leaders of the expedition wrote their narratives, which were jointly published in 1854 in three volumes (the third consisting of maps) by the House of Representatives. Herndon's is by all standards the better of the two and for that reason it alone is given this new publication. As the first North American (although hundreds of other persons had done it before them) ever to descend the whole length of the Amazon, the narrative has the advantage of being "American" in feeling, all the allusions and similes are given an "American twist." It becomes here a

sort of controlled wonderment, the travail of river travel written down and the humor of the journey played up. It does not have, despite the insistence of Hamilton Basso who writes the introduction to this edition, any outstanding place in the history of exploratory literature of South America; but it is a good report, well-written and factual. It is good, too, that the publishers make it available to us in modern dress, the only mystery being the reason for their choice of editor. Hamilton Basso, a charming writer, is fully at home in his own American environment, but he knows little about South America. Where footnotes could have been helpful, there are none; and where they are least needed, there they are. But apart from this, it is a delight to have a mid-nineteenth-century narrative on the Amazon.

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"Secret Cities of Old South America" belongs to the realm of science fiction. Since there has been of late a plethora of books, pseudo-scientific in nature, which have muddled the American anthropological waters, something should be said of this one. In South America, according to the lunatic-fringed cosmology of Mr. Wilkins, there are unknown monsters, snakes eighty feet long, fierce pygmies, secret cities in the Matto Grosso jungle in which "white" Indians, descendants of the ancient Atlanteans, still live. There are golden-spangled El Dorados still waiting their Champollion. There are "ancient manuscripts written on plantain leaves" which tell the mysteries of the lost Atlantis-province of "Hy-Brazil." (The Incas were not the Incas, but descendants of a white Frisian who came with Finns and Magyars by boat to pre-Colombian South America.) And the final gaffe: An English sailor was wrecked on the coast of Peru in the twelfth century. When asked by an Indian who he was, he replied, "I am an Englishman." Thereafter the Indians called him "*Ingas-man Capac*" ("the handsome Englishman") and by this he descends as Inca Manco Capac, the founder of the Inca Empire.

Such is this book. There are mysterious mutterings from a "traveler," quotations from documents without source, gleanings from anthropologists, whole pages from the Greeks, the Romans, the sagas, the Spanish chroniclers—and fabricated drawings of what the author calls a pre-Colombian "Atlan-Brazil" alphabet. If this book opens, as the publishers claim, "new vistas of thought," it is only the thought that they should give more care to the "packaging" of their product, this *olla podrida* of gibberish, as "new historical discoveries."



Shrunken Offspring

HERITAGE OF CONQUEST. By Sol Tax and others. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press. 312 pp. \$5.

By OSCAR LEWIS

THE bulk of this volume is made up of a group of papers dealing with various aspects of the culture of the native peoples of what is here called Middle America, an area that embraces roughly the territory from central Mexico southward to the upper tip of Costa Rica. It is in effect a summing up of the theories advanced and conclusions reached at a seminar held in New York City in the fall of 1949, the participants in which numbered an even dozen scholars of recognized standing in the field of Middle-American ethnology and anthropology. Most of the papers here printed are supplemented by stenographic reports of round-table discussions that followed them, and the whole gives a comprehensive report both of the scope of the meeting and its findings.

This is no popular treatment of the subject designed for easy reading on the part of the general public. It is a specialists' job throughout, written by and for professionals in that field. The consequence is that its pages are often heavily freighted with the technical terms and other scholarly apparatus which scientists customarily use for the enlightenment of their fellows and the confusion of the uninitiated. In a way this is unfortunate, since the book contains a great deal of material that lay readers are likely to find not only new but highly interesting. For the Indians of the region covered by the survey, particularly those in the

rural areas, present a fascinating study. This is due not only to their comparatively isolated environment but also, and mainly, to their racial heritage which in certain ways is unique among the primitive peoples of the world. For not alone do the present-day native tribes have ancestral roots extending back to the ancient Aztec, Toltec, and Mayan civilizations, but they are the product too of the Spanish conquest of their territory more than four centuries ago. It is the very complexity of their cultural background that makes a scientific study a singularly rewarding field.

The present volume approaches the subject from a variety of viewpoints. Two introductory chapters, one by Paul Kirchhoff and the other by Robert Redfield and Sol Tax (the latter also serves as editor), set the stage by fixing the geographical limits of the study and outlining the general characteristics of Middle-American Indian society. Then follow twelve papers, each dealing with a different aspect of the central theme. While there is some overlapping of material, as is inevitable in treating of subjects as closely interrelated as these, each specialist sticks reasonably close to his chosen field. Among the topics dealt with are "Economy and Technology," by Mr. Tax, "Ethnic and Communal Relations," by Julio de la Fuente, and "Social Organization," by Calixta Guitera Holmes, both the last-named authors being members of the staff of the Museo Nacional de Mexico.

One of the most interesting and informative of the chapters from the standpoint of the general reader is that on "The Supernatural World and Curing," by Charles Wisdom of the University of Connecticut, describing numerous curious rites and rituals still performed by native tribes in rural Guatemala, Yucatan, and elsewhere to counteract the evil power of supernatural agencies or to ward off illness. Many of these practices and superstitions had their origin in the remote past, for, as the author states, "present-day Middle-American supernaturalism is the end product of the combination of Spanish Roman Catholicism (especially that of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries) and the indigenous religion and magic of the ancient Maya and Mexicans."

It is precisely these persisting evidences of Mayan, Toltec, and Aztec cultures, overlaid with that of their early Spanish conquerors, which crop up again and again in these studies of the Central American tribes of today, that give "Heritage of Conquest" its significance and interest.