

**Review: In Search of the Amazon: Brazil, The United States, and the Nature of a Region**

By Seth Garfield

**Reviewed by John D. Dea**

Portland, Oregon USA

Garfield, Seth. *In Search of the Amazon: Brazil, The United States, and the Nature of a Region*. Durham and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2013. 343pp. ISBN: 9780822355717, US \$94.95, Cloth; ISBN: 9780822355854, US \$26.95, acid-free paper.

Environmental historian Seth Garfield's *In Search of the Amazon: Brazil, the United States, and the Nature of a Region* presents a snapshot of an often ignored period in Brazil's historic struggle for industrial development and seemingly endless antagonistic relationship with the Amazon rainforest. Covering three-fifths of Brazil, the wildness of the Amazon Basin has served as a rich yet seasonally inaccessible source of natural resources, opportunity, social struggle, and geopolitical insecurity. In often overwhelming and exhaustive detail, Garfield chronicles the episodic success and social consequences of the Brazilian rubber trade during its second boom era of the 1940's. Beginning with a review of the Amazon's conception as an impenetrable frontier, Garfield explores the high-expense and joint efforts of the regime of Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945) and the United States to breathe new life into Amazonian rubber tapping during World War II. By reestablishing a waning industry, Vargas and his Estado Novo hoped to permanently populate and modernize the elusive Amazon, while the United States hoped to ameliorate its wartime shortage of rubber.

Isolated by vast distances from urban centers, rubber tappers of the early 20th century Brazilian Amazon, called *seringueiros*, contended with malaria, poverty, exploitative credit and supply prices of rubber bosses, leaving them subject to injustices, physical violence, and indentured slavery. Drawing on a huge array of sources, Garfield tells the story of how this trend was protracted by the state-directed migration of tens of thousands of peasant farmers from the drought-crippled Northeastern region of Ceará to the Amazon. Fueled by U.S. investment, the Vargas regime hoped to utilize the influx of population to develop and modernize the Amazon, while the United States hoped it would serve to ameliorate its wartime rubber shortage by increasing the Amazonian labor force.

Garfield's book expands upon other recent works on the rubber trade in Brazil, such as Greg Grandin's *Fordlandia* and Barbara Weinstein's *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850-1920*. However, while many such studies aim to expose the historical impacts that a particular actor, society, or industry has had on a this region, Garfield's project in *In Search of the Amazon* is to cover how the ecology of the Amazon Basin itself influenced the sociopolitical structures and international political relations of Brazil in the build-up to World War II and its policies during wartime. While the actors and organizations that forged the policy that made the second rubber boom possible, and those that lived through it, occupy the foreground of Garfield's writing, the Amazon,

its fierce climate, and the effects it had on the migrants who relocated there remained present throughout the book as an anchor through which all events are tied together.

Readers may find themselves hungry for information on topics not included in this product of Garfield's work. For example, one might have hoped for a brief discussion of the rubber trade's impact on the indigenous people of Brazil. While Garfield's previous work, *Indigenous Struggle at the Heart of Brazil: State Policy, Frontier Expansion, and the Xavante Indians, 1939-1988* (2001), touches upon this issue, incorporating themes of indigenous struggle in addition to that of *seringueiros* would have enhanced the present book as well.

*In Search of the Amazon* is aimed at academically specialized audiences at a graduate level. In addition to Brazilian and Latin American historians, those who may appreciate Garfield's work the most are those whose research interests are geared toward the influence of natural resources on North-South relations, migration policies, and the global labor exploitation.

---

John D. Dea, [jdea@pdx.edu](mailto:jdea@pdx.edu), Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, USA 970-764-7093, USA.

***Electronic Green Journal, Issue 40, Winter 2017, ISSN: 1076-7975***