

Liverpool to Manaus via the River Amazon

Dr Reginald Koettlitz

Expedition surgeon, geologist and botanist

Aubrey A Jones - Koettlitz biographer

Many regular readers of The Dover Society magazine will recall that expedition surgeon Dr Reginald Koettlitz, a resident of Dover, literally travelled to the northern and southern extremities of the planet, through north east Africa but little is known of his journey up the mighty Amazon River. I intend to address this omission in this article.

On returning from the Weld Blundell expedition to Africa, and before heading south with Scott on the Discovery, funds were required to support his wife, Marie-Louise, in Dover. The Red Cross Line owned ships trading between the United Kingdom and the furthest stretches of the Amazon between Para and Manaus. Manaus was located 1,000 miles up the Amazon River and was the centre of an expanding rubber and nut trade. The monthly steamers ran from Liverpool to Manaus and Iquitos, Peru, which is over 2,000 miles from the mouth of the river.

Dr Koettlitz had a wish to see this 'famous stream' which delivered the greatest volume of water into the Atlantic Ocean so in April 1900 set off in the steamer 'Sobralense' as the ship's surgeon en-route to Manaus. He expected his medical duties to be light which would allow opportunities to study the native people and natural history of North Eastern Brazil. In fact, his subsequent collections handed to the University of Edinburgh on return were described as the 'greatest collection of entomological specimens made by one man in such a short time' to date.

After a brief stop in Madeira the first port

of call in the Amazon basin was Para, also known as Belem. A river pilot had been taken on board from a lightship stationed in the approach to the Amazon. Para was a fine city with a mixed population of over 100,000 Europeans, Americans, local Indians, former slaves from Africa but dominated by Brazilians of Portuguese descent. The city emerged from the forest. It had many large and impressive public buildings, gardens and churches with a rapid tramcar system widely used. Dr Koettlitz noticed the tram drivers held banknotes between their teeth, considering this to be a fertile source of contagious disease. This practice caused some amusement as the ship had been held offshore whilst undergoing a health check on crew and passengers.



Public Building in Para

Para is the launch location for all forms of river traffic to head up river and for produce being shipped from the Amazon region including, rubber, nuts, cocoa and other vegetable products. This included

species of wild animals and birds for use in zoos in the wider world.

After a prolonged stay the 'Sobralense' headed upstream via the 'Narrows' where the Para and Tocantins rivers merged with the Amazon. It provided a clear and close-up view of the thick tropical forest and abundant wildlife with many huge creepers and other plants in full bloom. This included the shy and now critically endangered 'water beast', the harmless sea cow or manatee. Butterflies and wonderfully coloured parrots and other birds were in abundance, monkeys screeched and the air was full of flying insects and moths in vast quantities. The Koettlitz scientific collections had begun!

The experienced river pilot, without whom the vessel could not proceed, moved the steamer from bank to bank showing clearly the extensive rubber trees and huts of the, 'Seringueiros' or rubber hunters who resided in small clearings alongside the mighty Amazon. The huts were raised many feet above ground level to avoid the river in flood when it rose at times by over 50 feet. It was a basic existence for the rubber hunters and their families. Koettlitz wrote, 'The Brazilian rarely sleeps in a bed preferring to rest where the breeze can have free play. Their life is far from healthy and malaria plays great havoc amongst them. All are addicted to raw rum, known as cashasse'.



A Seringueiros – local rubber hunter

A Seringueiros – local rubber hunter (note the small cups to collect the latex). The rubber latex was heated over an open fire to remove the liquid content and made into rubber balls for transport in canoes to Para and Manaus.

As the 'Sobralense' continued up river its scale and power held Dr Koettlitz in awe that its source was 3000 miles up-river in the Andean mountains. His religious instincts were aroused when writing, 'the contemplation of so great and magnificent an evidence of the almighty power which governs such works as these compels one to reverence the Author of it all'.

Despite the wonders of his environment the doctor was not always impressed with the attitude of some local inhabitants, writing, 'The ordinary Brazilian loves laziness and is so indolent that he will rarely do a stroke of work that he is not compelled to do'. If he had resided in these tropical conditions for any length of time he might not have formed such a judgemental opinion.

After short stop at Santarem and Obidos, both towns with a population of between 1000 – 2000 inhabitants but important with regard to rubber production, Brazil nuts and other local products, Manaus was soon on the horizon. At each of these stops Dr Koettlitz added to his collection of insects, marine life, birds and small animal. Throughout his many expeditions both polar and to hotter climes his industry in making such collections was endless. Even porpoises were regularly seen this far up the mighty river.

After five days the ship arrived at the confluence of the Amazon and Rio Negro and finally the capital of the Amazonas region, Manaus. The splendid city is actually on the Rio Negro, a river named

after its very black colour although clear when placed in a glass. The city had a population of 40,000 people and was the seat of the regional governor and centre of the commercial, political and social life of this vast region. The city had fine public buildings and parks and a sizable number of European and American merchants. Apart from being the centre of the rubber industry there was a popular market in wild animals, fish and even herons for their plumes to satisfy hat production in Europe.



Manaos harbour showing the scale of the Amazon and Rio Negro rivers.



Wild turtles for export from Manaos harbour.

Whilst the 'Sobralense' discharged her cargo and took on goods for the return journey Dr Koettlitz made a short journey up the Rio Negro by canoe when the river was in flood which allowed access to the

tops of the huge trees abundant alongside the river bank. He continued to add to his collections, especially butterflies, moths and other insects many new not just to him but new to science confirmed on his return to the UK. But, the stay was brief and the 'Sobralense' was soon heading down river to Para, a journey made in half the time due to the swift current running towards the Atlantic Ocean.

The ship returned to Liverpool via New York and 'Humboldt's Black Water', so called by the skipper but hundreds of miles from the Amazon mouth. Koettlitz was convinced this was the soil run-off from the Amazon so great was its power. During the journey Koettlitz continued to add to his marine collections at every opportunity all to be presented to the University of Edinburgh on return.

Soon the Antarctic beckoned, the journey south with Scott on board the Discovery with Dr Koettlitz as chief expedition surgeon and botanist. Yet more collections to be made, the name of Dr Reginald Koettlitz of Dover to be forever known as, Scott's Forgotten Surgeon.



Manaos Opera House