

## The Putumayo Affair

(URL: <http://www.bouncing-balls.com/timeline/putumayo.htm>)

At the same time that King Leopold was stripping the Congo of its wealth, rubber was pouring out of South America in much larger quantities but there was no one person dominating the trade. Nevertheless, certain areas were just as much fiefdoms to their rulers as was the Congo to Leopold. One example which was eventually brought to the notice of the consuming countries was dubbed “the Putumayo affair”. The Putumayo is a major river in its own right, some 3,000 miles long, which rises in the mountains on the west coast of Colombia and joins the Amazon in Brazil. For much of its length it forms the border between Peru and Colombia or Ecuador and Colombia. It was in this region, in an area about the size of Belgium, that one Julio Cesar Arana built his rubber empire.

Arana was born around 1864 in the Peruvian town of Rioja, where his father sold hats. By the time he was fourteen he was also established in the trade. In 1879 his father sent him to work as a secretary, where he learned business administration and bookkeeping but by 1881 he was again trading on the Amazon, bartering a range of goods (including hats) for rubber. By 1889 he had established a rubber-collecting business with his brother-in-law, Pablo Zumaeta, in Tarapoto and married his childhood sweetheart, Eleonora. He was soon buying rubber estates and recruiting natives from Ceará to work on them. However hard they worked, their transportation debts to Arana never seemed to decrease.

By 1896 Arana had moved the centre of his operations to Iquitos and was living in a ten-room house with international business connections. He continued to prosper and within a few years his family was living in France (Biarritz) so that his children could receive a European education with French and British tutors. In 1907, at the height of the Amazonian rubber boom, he arrived in London to register his company – the Peruvian Amazon Company (PAC) - capitalised at £1,000,000. He had excellent credentials as the biggest rubber exporting company in Iquitos, he employed British subjects and he had many contacts in Europe but his reasons for choosing England were not just financial. The political uncertainties of the region and claims on his land by other companies made registration in England a political, as well as an economic, move.

Whilst Arana was in London the scandal began to gestate, fertilised by Benjamin Saldana Rocca who filed criminal complaints against Arana and his companies for rape, murder and torture of the Indian tappers, their wives and children. Even though Rocca ran his own newspaper and campaigned vigorously against Arana for many months, the courts were totally inactive so Rocca decided that his stories and the evidence he possessed needed a wider audience.

He was lucky to recruit, through his son, a young American, W E Hardenburg, to his cause. Hardenburg had been badly treated by Arana and was certainly after revenge although he was later to be described as “a man of simple Christian standards” and as an idealist by his biographer. Whatever his motivations, Hardenburg was happy to set sail for London in July 1909 with masses of documentary evidence that Britain, the world leader in antislavery legislation in the 19th century, was home to a company practising all the most terrible of activities associated with slavery in the 20th century!

In London he met the Reverend John H Harris of the Anti-slavery and Aborigines Protection Society who had just finished his decade-long campaign against Leopold and the Congo rubber trade. Harris then introduced Hardenburg to Sydney Paternoster of the newspaper "Truth" who was able to confirm enough of Rocca's story to continue the crusade in his paper. His allegations included rape, torture and murder of the natives and emphasised that the PAC was a British company. The uproar the articles caused could not be ignored and in May 1910 the Foreign Office asked Roger Casement, who had also been involved in exposing the Congo horrors, to investigate. He travelled throughout the Putumayo region and reported that the fundamentals of Rocca/Hardenburg's allegations were based on fact. He demanded that the law should take its course and in order to prevent a Government cover-up, as he had experienced with his reports from the Congo, he copied his report to the Anti-slavery and Aborigines Protection Society. (This was probably sensible as it took until 1912 for the UK Government to actually publish his report).

At this point it should be pointed out that other voices were being raised against Arana with the governments of Columbia, Ecuador and Peru all being concerned with the tales coming out of the Putumayo. However, nationalism and politics were used to obscure the truth. Columbia and Ecuador used the stories to take the moral high ground and to reinforce their territorial claims on the area whilst Arana roused all patriotic Peruvians to help him, blaming soldiers from the other two countries for the atrocities. The Peruvian government had been continuing its investigations of Arana and spurred on by articles in the "serious" press it directed Judge Carlos Valcácel to investigate. This appointment fell through and it was left to Judge Rómulo Paredos to set off and initiate Peru's formal investigation in early 1911. Four months later he returned with his evidence which, when documented, came to 1242 pages and confirmed all that had been said about the horrors of the Putumayo. Valcácel supported Paredos and issued over 200 arrest warrants but the pro-Arana camp was so powerful and vociferous that he quickly realised his life was in danger and fled the country. The courts cancelled the warrants.

Arana's argument was simplistic and appealing: his company was a strong civilising force in the wilds of the jungle and he was promoting Peru's national interests and international position. To say otherwise was simply unpatriotic. At a national level this argument could appeal to a compliant government but Peru was now facing a rising tide of anger in the UK and, perhaps more importantly, by 1912 the growth of Asian plantation rubber was starting to threaten the wild Amazonian material. The writing was on the wall for the Peruvian economy! America was sitting on the fence for fear of upsetting its South American neighbours whilst Brazil was keeping a very low profile as it was well aware that "the Putumayo Affair" was not unique but fairly typical of rubber collecting throughout the Amazon and related basins.

The publication of (now Sir Roger) Casement's report in 1912 by the UK government contained figures which could no longer be ignored. Casement calculated that at least 30,000 natives had been directly murdered or killed by deliberate starvation brought about by crop destruction for a gain of 4,000 tons of rubber in the Putumayo region alone in the first 12 years of the century. On November 5th 1912 a UK Parliamentary Committee began six months of hearings into the affair. Hardenburg, Harris, Paternoster and Casement all

gave evidence as did Arana himself and three members of the board of PAC. Arana's defence was two-pronged – Nobody had told him what was going on, he had not witnessed anything himself and his accusers were all of bad character and unreliable. He had to accept Casement's evidence but, as he had already said, he knew nothing of the atrocities himself.

The Committee's report showed its opinion of Arana, accusing him of "callous indifference and guilty knowledge" whilst it accused the board members of "negligent ignorance". It further concluded that the Putumayo affair was only one shockingly bad instance of conditions liable to be found over a wide area in South America.

The British courts could not imprison Arana who returned to Peru and continued his business. Britain tried to persuade Peru, Brazil and the US to close his business down but to no avail. In 1914 the First World War led to a sustained demand for all Amazonian rubber and the PAC survived until 1920.

Arana's business interests continued however and in 1932 He, together with his son and daughter, were involved with a "Patriotic Junta" which attempted to reclaim land ceded to Columbia by Peru a decade earlier. This resulted in a full-scale but brief war between the two countries, stopped under pressure from the US. The losers were, as always, the Indians and, this time, Arana himself who lost the lands he was fighting to regain. The time had come to retire; he was after all now 69, but it was some 20 years before the end of Julio Cesar Arana. He died in 1952.

Compared with King Leopold and the Congo, Arana's reign of terror was on a very small scale but, pro rata, it is comparable. For over a decade he stripped what rubber he could from the Putumayo and the scale of his atrocities can be deduced from the fact that the contribution of the Putumayo to the world's rubber supply over this period was some 4000 tons – and, according to Sir Roger Casement, the lives of at least 30,000 Indians. 4 Million kilos of rubber for about 2 million kilos of natives. The British Parliament concluded that this was only one shockingly bad instance of what was probably happening over much of the rubber-producing area of South America!