

# **The Thief at the End of the World: Rubber, Power, and the Seeds of Empire**

*Joe Jackson*

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**The Thief at the End of the World: Rubber, Power, and the Seeds of Empire** Joe Jackson  
The story of one man's journey down the Amazon— and how it changed history

In 1876, a man named Henry Wickham smuggled seventy thousand rubber tree seeds out of the rainforests of Brazil and delivered them to Victorian England's most prestigious scientists at Kew Gardens. Those seeds, planted around the world in England's colonial outposts, gave rise to the great rubber boom of the early twentieth century—an explosion of entrepreneurial and scientific industry that would change the world. The story of how Wickham got his hands on those seeds—a sought-after prize for which many suffered and died—is the stuff of legend. In this utterly engaging account of obsession, greed, bravery, and betrayal, author and journalist Joe Jackson brings to life a classic Victorian fortune hunter and the empire that fueled, then abandoned, him.

In his single-minded pursuit of glory, Wickham faced deadly insects, poisonous snakes, horrific illnesses, and, ultimately, the neglect and contempt of the very government he wished to serve. His idealism and determination, as well as his outright thievery, perfectly encapsulate the essential nature of Great Britain's colonial adventure in South America. *The Thief at the End of the World* is a thrilling true story of reckless courage and ambition.

## The Thief at the End of the World: Rubber, Power, and the Seeds of Empire Details


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# **From Reader Review The Thief at the End of the World: Rubber, Power, and the Seeds of Empire for online ebook**

## **Brendan Hanratty says**

Great read if you are interested in history and the British empire, very detailed

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## **Gerry says**

I enjoyed this book and the education of the many good Amazonian tribes. This book was everything I expected in terms of the historical story of rubber, the Amazon, and the encroachment of humans upon a necessary resource. Parts of the book will cover the environment by default but this isn't the topic of the book. The topic is the history of rubber. My interest in this book is the attachment it has to the Second World War and the Imperial Forces of Japan in their capture of the Malayan peninsula because of their need for rubber. The rubber grown there were started as a result of the smuggled seeds from Brazil through one Henry Wickham. A terrific story that will take you on many journeys. I am giving this 4 stars as opposed to 5 because I believe another 100 pages of material could have been added based on scientific and production numbers; slight more detail in this regard would have suited this book better. However, it is a very good story and historical account.

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## **Karson says**

I gave this book two stars because it had some interesting information in it, but overall, it wasn't very good. The time period it dealt with was about 1880 up to about 1920. It is a time that I am really interested in with the industrial revolution happening, the start of the first world war, and all that stuff. It focuses on a character named Henry Whickam who was responsible for smuggling 70,000 or so hevea (high quality rubber tree) seeds from the Amazon, and putting them into Britain's control. Rubber was a hot commodity at the time because new machines that whole economies depended upon needed rubber parts to make them go - most notably bicycles and the Model T Ford automobiles. Whickam's theft shifted the control of Rubber from the Amazon to Great Britain. That's pretty much the book in a nutshell. The author meanders too much and gets too into minute scientific details for the reader to pick up any momentum. I am most disappointed in this book for what it could have been. There are some great underlying themes that the author barely touched on. The exploitation of a developing nation is one of them. He discusses it a bit, but he doesn't really dig into how, once again, a prosperous nation saw that a third world nation had a worthwhile natural resource and stole it from them; keeping the rich rich and the poor poor. There also could have been a more adventurous feel. The title is so good that you think your getting yourself into a great story, but it just doesn't deliver. Fernandez-Armesto's Pathfinders is everything this book wasn't. It picked out intriguing themes and was written well. This one was a two star pooper. Anyone know any good books about the Industrial Revolution?

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## **Kay says**

Today's world seems obsessed by and held in thrall by oil, but a similar scenario played out from the 1850's up through WWI with a different commodity: rubber. The man responsible for smuggling the seeds that paved the way for Britain's vast rubber plantations in Ceylon, Singapore, Malaysia and elsewhere -- and the subsequent end of Brazil's stranglehold on the rubber trade -- is at the center of the book.

Henry Wickham was a man who dreamed big but failed time and again. Even his successful smuggling of thousands of rubber seeds to Britain was a semi-failure until years later, when thick-headed British authorities recognized the superiority of the precise type of seeds that Wickham had provided.

In any case, if I have one quibble with this book it's that Wickham doesn't really ever seem to come to life for me. The author takes great pains to lay out the rather exasperating details of Wickham's exploits around the globe -- one failed plantation after another on a number of continents -- but although I usually have the utmost sympathy for misguided eccentrics, I was surprised to find how uninteresting and unappealing I found Henry. His wife, Violet, came across as a more sympathetic person, but even then there seemed to be a strain to reconstruct her relationship with Henry.

The most interesting parts of the book, which unfortunately were not as well developed as the Henry-and-Violet tale, had to do with the growth of the rubber trade and the international wheelings-and-dealings that accompanied it. In particular, the author does a good job of explaining the appalling human toll that the rubber industry left in its wake. Most people know of the gruesome history of the Congo Free State, King Leopold's personal domain. During his reign, the population there dropped from 25 million to 10 million, "15 million dead for approximately 75,000 tons of rubber." I wasn't aware that a similar scenario had played out in Puntamayo in the Upper Amazon, however.

Another very interesting aspect of the book was how various nations (especially the US) took steps to insure that they had a source of rubber that was not controlled by foreign powers. Sound familiar? It should, for the parallels of the rubber and oil industries then and now are quite striking.

"The 'new imperialists' who rose to power in Britain in the early twentieth century sounds very much like the American neocons who rose in the early twenty-first. Both saw threats from without, believed that control of the world's resources was a battleground, and concluded that the means of survival was a preemptive will to empire.... The world was an unfriendly, predatory place, warned the new imperialists: Maintaining the resources and allies intrinsic to empire was the only way to survive."

In the US, people such as Harvey Firestone (of the tire company) warned that Americans needed to be able to produce their own rubber and not have the price and flow of the precious commodity determined by other powers. Thus the "quest to find a new rubber source was wrapped in a flag."

As a coda, Henry Ford's ill-fated attempt to establish a vast rubber "company town" in the Amazon is described. It has comic overtones, as when the workers riot, not because of poor conditions, but because they resisted the attempt to "Americanize" them, having them work in assembly-line fashion, eat in the company cafeteria, and live in US-style company housing. "No more spinach!" was the rallying cry of the first riot, in protest of the force-fed healthy diet that was dished out in the cafeteria. In the end, Ford's dream rubber colony collapsed because of problems mass cultivating rubber in the fragile soil of the Amazon.

All in all, an interesting social/political/economic history of a once all-consuming commodity. What will they write in future centuries of our romance with oil, I wonder?

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## **Todd Stockslager says**

Review title: He lost all the other bets he made

This is a sad, sad story about a man who failed at everything he tried except for the theft of the title. Henry Wickham was a British adventurer who went from the height of empire to the heart of the Amazon in search of his fortune and fame. Along the way, he learned hard lessons about living in the jungle and making a living from the jungle. Among those lessons were where to find and how to harvest latex from wild rubber trees, at the turning point in the 19th century when the spread of electricity, trains, bicycles and then cars made rubber the most valuable and sought natural resource of the day.

In the class conscious Victorian era, Wickham had little hope for advancement back home, so his journey made sense but the lessons were hard earned, disease wracking his body and business failures wrecking his hopes for financial security. Despite his initial failure, he married his true love Violet and convinced members of both of their extended families to travel to Brazil with them to share in the future prospects of prosperity. Instead continued financial struggles, disease and finally death shattered family unity with irreparable estrangements.

Just when it seemed like failure was a lifetime curse, Jackson won his one bet, relying on his rubber knowledge and tenuous introductions to scientific royalty at the empirical botanical gardens at Kew to earn the promise of funding for smuggling rubber seeds from Brazil to Kew. From there, they would be nourished and transplanted to British holdings in Asia where they could be replanted under controlled conditions to improve yields and simplify harvesting. Wickham succeeded, gathering, packing and transporting 70,000 seeds, earning over 700 pounds and providing the basis for the future British dominance in the rubber market.

But Wickham, failing to earn the respect and patronage of the scientific elite back home, headed back out to the edges of empire, accompanied by Violet. But loss followed loss, and finally Violet apparently lost faith and patience, leaving Henry alone on a South Pacific island under desperate circumstances in another failed business attempt. Violet and Henry never met again, both dying separately more than 20 years later within months of each other. Of all the sad facts in Wickham's story, this is the saddest.

Even when Wickham was credited and knighted for his seeding of the rubber miracle in Asia, he continued his pattern of investment and failure in far-flung environments. There is little feel-good in this story. Jackson weaves the history of rubber harvesting and the growth of the worldwide market for it around the story of Wickham. It is a checkered history, with the brutal exploitation of the Congo by King Leopold of Belgium (documented in Adam Hochschild's "King Leopold's ghost" which I read before I started reviewing books) and Henry Ford's failed Fordlandia in Brazil. By focusing on one small man who played a part in the story, Jackson makes the suffering personal. His account is extensively footnoted and sourced, lacking only maps of the areas referenced in South and Central America to show the reader the locations of events.

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## **Mike Maurer says**

I found the history of rubber and its impact to the British empire fascinating. I didn't know that people from the confederacy (U.S. Civil war) had moved to South America to found a new slave state. A lot of small, side bits, where the author had ventured into first sources to pull out the thoughts and motivations of the players

around the rubber trade.

But it is central character that I didn't have much interest in. He is a mainly bombastic loser, never achieving much of anything. I kept feeling sorry for his wife, as she is dragged through his numerous misadventures. The actual movement of the seeds is anticlimactic, so do not expect much in the way of intrigue.

But it is also interesting how the Victorian mindset kept the British from obtaining their monopoly for three decades. The main character did know his rubber trees, but since he wasn't high born, he wasn't seen as being knowledgeable. But one that was, but didn't know his trees, led the British down the wrong path. A good lesson for modern day thinking, that amateur scientists may actually know more than their PhD counterparts. That all should be heard and debated.

Overall, the book provides a good sense of the age. The reason behind the desire for rubber, it's difficulty in obtaining it and how the British sowed up the market once the 20th century got roaring. It is in these passages that the material really shines.

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### **Bethany says**

I gave you reading this book halfway through because I just didn't like it, but other people definitely might. It's well written. It's an adventure story basically, about this British explorer who was gallivanting around the jungles of Latin America in the 1800s. He ultimately hit upon a grove of prized rubber trees and smuggled the seeds back to England, and from there they were planted elsewhere in the empire - India I think - and helped cement Britain's status as the global leader in that and other trades. Probably an interesting story, it's just a lot of him and the jungle. Lots of malaria. Lots of insects. Lots of encounters with native people. Lots of wrong turns. If you've ever read the Lewis & Clark expedition book, *Undaunted Courage*, this is kind of like that. Although a more fitting title for this hapless guy's exploits would be *Unabated Stupidity*. Or *Unmitigated misery*. Seriously the third time the author wrote about how parasitic worms had burrowed themselves under his skin, I decided that was it for us. The book and I. I will leave this to those who have stronger stomachs.

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### **Jane Wynne says**

Fascinating history of the rubber industry based around Sir Henry Wickham, a true adventurer and pioneer whose place in history was nearly dismissed by those in charge of Kew. I learned a lot about life in those difficult places and how brave these men and women were.

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### **Fraser Sherman says**

In the 19th century, rubber was a miracle. It could be used for waterproofing, insulation, molded like plastics would later be and became essential for cushioning moving parts in vehicles and engines. Joe Jackson chronicles how Henry Wickham, a man who failed at almost everything he tried, successfully smuggled thousands of rubber-plant seeds out of Amazonian Brazil and back to England. Once Britain transplanted the seeds to the Far East, rubber shifted from a rare, limited resource commanding a high price to a cheap,

affordable product.

*Thief at the End of the World* mixes Wickham's biography, the history of rubber, the eerie world of Western civilization's outposts on the Amazon, England's relentless imperialism, and its looting of natural resources from Third World countries (cinchona taken and transplanted from other parts of South America, and tea from China, though that's not covered here). The book also covers the internal conflicts in England that made Wickham's success harder, from the class system to the developing government bureaucracy. An interesting read.

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## **Sarah Beth says**

This work of non-fiction details the events that unfolded in 1876, when Henry Wickham, a British subject abroad in the Amazon, managed to bring home 70,000 rubber tree seeds to scientists at Kew Gardens in England. In this Victorian age of empire, England would ultimately use these seeds to farm rubber in various colonies, fueling the rubber boom of the early twentieth century. Thanks to Wickham, this easy access to rubber allowed for an explosion in the railroad and automobile industry and led to innovations such as gas masks during both World Wars, but it meant the collapse of the Amazon economy, which had previously been the sole exporter of rubber. This book is also a biography of Henry Wickham, who, although having a vast impact on international economy, led a migratory life full of failed dreams and poverty in outposts around the world.

Henry Wickham was born in London in 1846 to a relatively prosperous family. However, his father died young, propelling his family into a much lower social class and forcing his mother to make a living for her three children through a millinery shop. It seems that pursuit of wealth and a rise to his original social setting pushed Henry to make a trip to Brazil as a young man. Henry made multiple trips to the Amazon and eventually convinced his wife, mother, sister and her husband, and brother and his wife to all move to the Amazon and establish a rubber plantation. However, the harsh reality of the tropical setting impeded their success. Henry's mother and sister died in the Amazon, which seems to have pushed Henry to collect the rubber trees to send to England as a means of escape from a jungle that he finally realized would kill him if he stayed. Amazingly, he left without alerting his remaining family, slipping away on a ship with just his wife, Violet. Henry never spoke to or saw his remaining family again.

Despite advocating to assist with growth and production of his rubber trees, Henry was brushed aside and compensated with a mere 700 pounds for his efforts to bring the seeds, which weighed nearly one and a half tons (183) to England. He then spent the next twenty years on the edges of the British Empire, first in Queensland, Australia and later in Belize. Through everything - including their homes burning multiple times, extreme hard labor, total isolation, and poverty, Violet stayed by his side until she realized that his schemes would never bear fruit and left him to return to England. Although they seem to have had a close and loving marriage, they never spoke again.

Meanwhile, the original seeds Henry brought to England spawned an immense industry. "In all, some 5.32 million trees were growing in the colonies in 1905, about 56 million by 1910" (271). And for just 700 pounds to Henry, the payoff internationally was huge: "From 1913, when the British plantations took over, until 1922, the United States alone had imported 2.7 billion pounds of rubber for \$1.16 billion" (282).

Although the author does attempt to weave the international story of rubber alongside Henry's own rather hapless existence, I felt that there was disconnect. It was hard to follow the track of international events and the timeline of what exactly happened with his seeds after they were delivered. Additionally, the early part of

the narrative, before the author seems to have been assisted by the journals left by Henry's wife Violet, was difficult to follow, although that is likely do to the spotty nature of Henry's recordkeeping during this time period. Throughout, the book seemed to struggle between wanting to be a history of the Amazons, to becoming a history of the rubber industry, to a biography of Henry Wickham. Although certainly all related, the book seemed to only do each of those in part.

I did enjoy learning a great deal about the Amazon through reading this book. It was clearly a wild and untamed place (just as it still largely is today). Henry suffered from foul ailments during his time there, such as the time his back became infested pustules full of botfly larvae. "The larva had evolved two anal hooks to hold it firmly in place; pull it out and the maggots burst, filling the cavity with toxins and loosing an infection more dangerous than the original larva. It breathes through snorkel-like spiracles poking from the skin" (101). It was also eye-opening to read more about the rubber industry, particularly the cruel treatment of natives who were used as disposable labor during this period.

Henry seems to a man of contradictions - seemingly a devoted husband, he's also capable of abandoning his family in the jungle and pursuing his harebrained schemes over his wife. Likewise, his legacy is a mixed one. Although knighted and dubbed the "father of the rubber industry" in Great Britain, "Brazilians dubbed him the 'executioner of Amazonas,' 'the prince of thieves,' and called his theft 'hardly defensible in international law'" (191).

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### **Suzy says**

A part of imperial history that I had never considered -- when RUBBER was king, much like oil is now. Good book, considering I bought it at the dollar store.

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### **Camilla Zahn says**

Henry Wickham's journey is dazzlingly told in this book. I was born in Brazil and never knew this story up until my father told me about this book. I found it magic how Joe Jackson told the story of the seeds, of rubber, England and the man behind it all. It makes you wonder how come the act of this man changed the world so much, and, as you see through the book, it ended up not being so great to Wickham. I really really loved the parallels between Henry's destiny and the growth of English Empire as well as the path the seeds went from Brazil to Kew's gardens and beyond. Loved how he described what it did to Brazil then and what it means to the whole debate of biopiracy now a days. I also loved the way he described the forest and its wealthiness in vivid details. It was like I was there in the forest too.

The only thing that made me mad was that the author had so much information to deal with and sometimes he drifted away from the main point to tell another story then another then I was almost forgetting the first point he was talking about. But it is just a minor issue. And the end!!!! The last pages took my breath away!

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### **Kyle says**

This book details the story of how Henry Wickham smuggled 70,000 rubber tree seeds out of the Amazon jungles to take back to England so the British Empire could establish a rubber plantation in Southeast Asia. Though I found parts of the story entertaining (specifically the horrific stories of the hardships of living in



the jungle) and educational I just wasn't really into the book. Wickman isn't that heroic of a figure. He treats his wife horribly, is responsible for the deaths of his mother and sister who he dragged to the jungle with him, abandons his family when he scores his 70,000 seeds, and is pretty much a failure in almost every business venture he tries. I also found the prose pretty tiresome at times and it was difficult to keep track of key players who were mentioned once and then brought up 50 pages later without referencing their role.

Also this book continues the trend of providing notes at the end referencing only a page number (and not a note at the end of a sentence). I'm sure I missed some key information in the over 100 pages of appendices, notes, and glossary, but I have no desire to figure out the corresponding sentences on my own. If you feel the need to use notes, my preference would be footnotes on the same page, with a direct link to the section the note is about.

So are there any takeaways? Sure. Learn from the past. Those who neglect history are doomed to repeat it. The obligatory comparison of the current state of affairs in the United States to the declines of Empires Past.

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### **Jrobertus says**

This is a wonderful read. It focuses on Henry Wickham, the Victorian adventurer who smuggled rubber tree seeds from Brazil to Kew gardens and laid the foundation for the Malayan rubber plantations. But this is only part of the story. We also encounter British adventurers who stole the quinine producing Cinchona trees from Brazil. The book details people like Henry Ford who lost millions trying to make a Brazilian rubber plantation (Fordlandia) and Cargill's efforts to corner Brazil soy bean market. Also discussed are the horrors on the jungle, malaria, ants, snakes, and you name it. Finally, there is a discussion of Wickham himself. He explored, lived, and worked in Venezuela, Brazil, Belize, Australia, New Guinea, and a South Pacific atoll. The book is well researched and TOTALLY fascinating.

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### **Andrea says**

At the end of the nineteenth century, Henry Wickham managed to smuggle a large number of rubber seeds from the Amazon to Kew Gardens, thus setting the stage for British domination of the rubber supply through their Asian colonies. As trains, cars and other modern inventions caused demand for rubber to skyrocket, fortunes were made by British planters and traders.

Wickham, however, was a ne'er do well, despite his incredible energy and determination. He drifted about the British colonies for most of his adult life, attempting to promote various crops including rubber, but never managing to get in on the financial bonanzas.

This is a well written narrative style history that focuses on Wickham's personal trials but draws in the history of plantation rubber, the world forces that influenced the markets, the human suffering that built the various industries we have come to believe are necessary for modern life. It took me a chapter or two but I did get totally caught up in the story.

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