

## **A Brazilian Expedition: 1885 Style**

*'At the beginning of June 1885, I was in the enviable position of having just emerged from an agony called "moderations"... when, bent on a thorough change of scene and climate for my three and a half month's holiday, I cast about to see what part of the world would be, on this occasion, most worthy of patronage.'*

No doubt similar thoughts are currently running through many a 21 year old student's mind, but in this case the student in question, Randle Fynes Wilson Holme (1864-1957), decided to spend his university holiday exploring the forests of Brazil.

Having left Sherborne School just two years previously, Randle Holme (a 1878-1883) was in 1885 studying law at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Later, he recounted that on telling his father of his plans that most fathers would have replied, *"Indeed, you propose to camp out in the virgin forests of Brazil? I suggest three weeks at Margate would be much better, or, if you must go abroad, have a month in Holland and see the lovely old towns there."* But, instead he backed Randle's plan, the only condition being that he take his elder brother Clinton with him. So the brothers visited Piggotts' in Bishopsgate, London, where they purchased a gipsy tent with two poles, ground sheets, hammocks, canteens, lanterns, revolvers, sheath knives and tins of compressed vegetables. They then caught the train from St Pancras to Liverpool where they boarded the S.S. Magellan of the Pacific Steam Navigation Company. The brothers had agreed to give up shaving for the duration of their expedition, although Clinton broke his resolve and shaved after a group of pretty girls boarded the ship at Lisbon.

Arriving in Rio de Janeiro, which Randle describes as *'an old-fashioned tropical sea-port, with one or two storied houses, and the trams, which had no side walls, were drawn by mules... Also we saw slaves, for the Brazilian slaves were not finally emancipated until 1888 (3 years after we were there). There were two classes of slaves, the labourer in the fields, and the domestic servants who seemed to differ but little from any other domestic servants except that, I presume, they had no wages. The Emperor was still on the throne.'*

They travelled by train from Rio to San Paulo and then, after a further 8 hours travel, they reached Piracicaba. Piracicaba in 1885 was *'a flourishing town, mostly built of blue, one-storied houses, on the top and sides of a steep hill below which flows the glorious river Piracicaba. There are two fairly good hotels, a Roman Catholic church, a Protestant church, a sugar mill on the north side of the river, and a cotton mill on the south side.'* Here they engaged four men, a boy, some dogs, and three canoes, and with supplies consisting of sacks of beans, maize flour, salt, sugar, rice, coffee, salt pork and jerked beef, they set off down the river (which he described as being about three times the width of the Thames at Oxford) towards the village of Porto de Lençoes, a journey that would take them 10 days. The canoes they travelled in were 30 feet long by 1 ½ feet wide, hollowed out of one tree and curving up slightly towards the bows and stern. Two of the canoes were lashed together, allowing the brothers to sit side by side with bundles behind to lean against and a plank across the canoes as a kind of table on which Randle wrote much of his diary and from where Clinton shot at birds as they flew over the river.

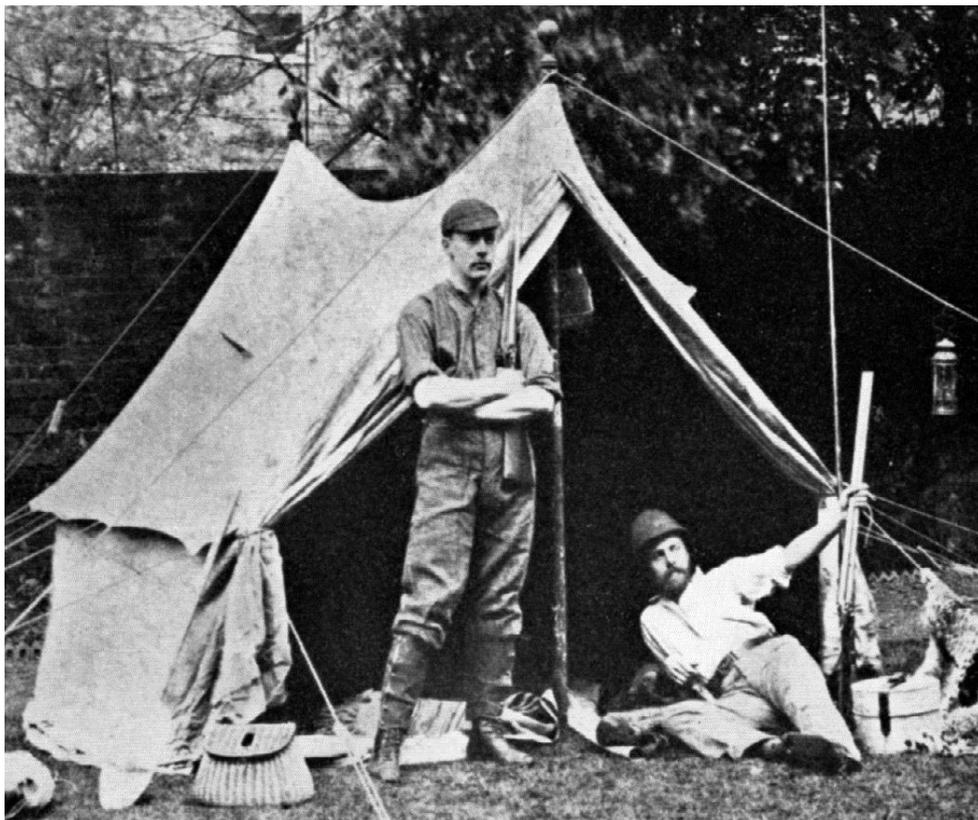
They camped on the river bank every night, making a clearing in the forest for their tent. Their diet consisted of beans and rice, plus whatever they had shot, which included monkeys, parrots, pigeons and peccary. The brothers did not speak any Portuguese when they arrived in Brazil. However, in 1885, San Paulo had a large German population and Randle's brother, who had spent some time at a school in Godesberg, could speak German so was able to arrange the expedition and purchase supplies. However, the men who accompanied them down the river spoke only Portuguese. Randle describes how they gradually picked up the language and learnt to communicate with the men: *'On the first night we ate our food alone, but we found it was far more amusing to have supper with the men, which we always did afterwards, round their camp fire. It was there that we tackled the language difficulty, and it was surprising to see how very soon we were able to converse with them. It is true that, when we returned to civilization, we found that no one else could understand us, but we had built up a language of our own which the men understood.'*

The brothers saw a wide variety of wildlife during their river journey: butterflies measuring 8 to 10 inches across the wing, humming birds, Pomba (a sort of pigeon), Bigua (a large water bird with superb plumage and a skin worth 10,000 reis in Rio), toucans, parrots and parakeets. They hunted tapirs and peccaries, shot alligators, heard pumas roaring at night and apes howling at the morning sun.

Randle ends his account saying, 'We claim to have opened out a new field for blasé tourists. In one University vacation, and at no great expense, we visited remote parts of the earth... We have seen, studied, and learnt to love the most beautiful part of the world in its virgin state – the forest girdle round the loins of the earth – even as it was created. To those who are situated like us, we think we may say with confidence, "Go and do likewise."

Randle Holmes published various accounts of his Brazilian expedition: in the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* (February 1887), *The Abbot of Sherborne* newspaper (21 October-11 November 1886), and in his autobiography, *Some Things I Have Done* (Privately published in 1949).

His adventures in Brazil obviously gave Randle the taste for adventure, for just two years later in 1887, after graduating from Oxford with a first-class honours law degree, he set off for Newfoundland, becoming one of the first Europeans to explore the interior of Labrador. In 1888, an account of his Labrador expedition was published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* (April 1888) and he was elected a Fellow of the Society the same year. In 1891, he was called to the bar and joined his father's law firm, where he practised for over 60 years. He became President of the Law Society during 1939-1940, and in 1941 was knighted.



This photo of Randle (lying down) and Clinton Holme was apparently taken in Brazil, although the brick wall behind the tent suggests that it was probably taken in Rio rather than in the Mato Grosso.