CURUCUCÚ

THE ADVENTURES OF A BRITISH EX-PAT IN COLOMBIA

Ben Curry

Foreword by Louis de Bernières

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CURUCUCÚ

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To the memory of my wife, Jill,
and for our family who helped to make Cururucú a home,
and for their children's children

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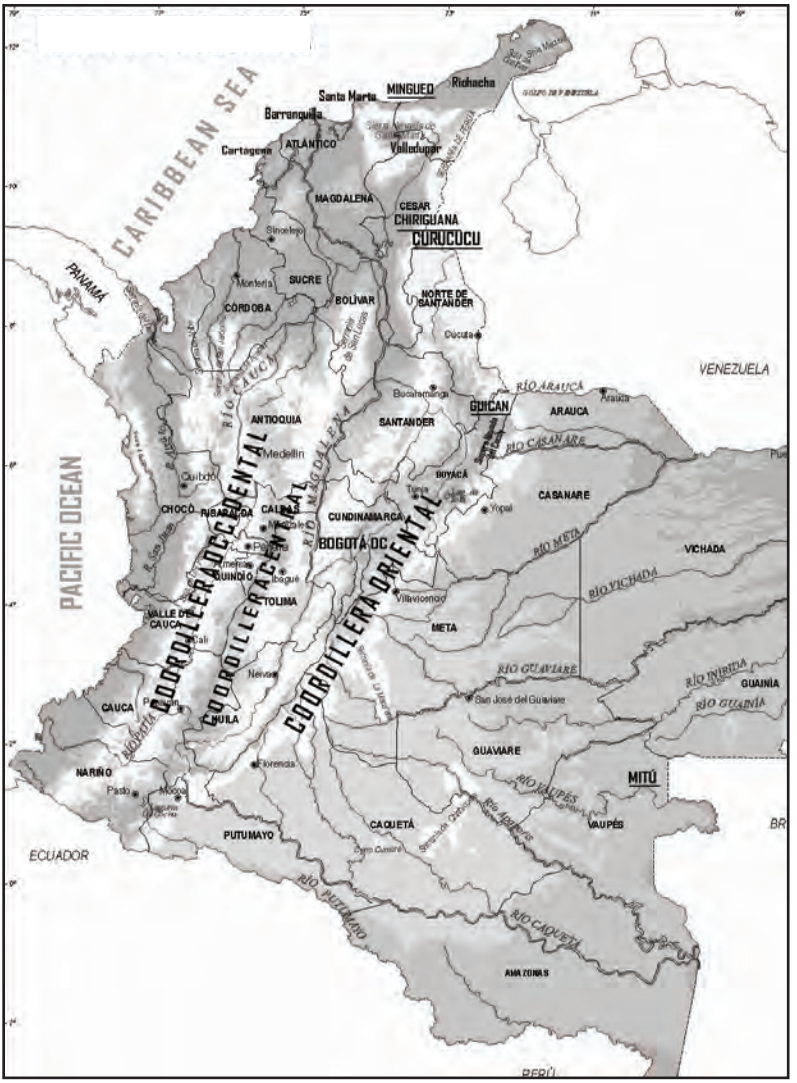

Map of Colombia.

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The Road Not Taken

A Poem by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

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In gratitude to the following:

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My father, W.B.Curry, Headmaster of Dartington Hall School, who gave me an understanding of intellectual integrity.

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My aunt, Helen Isherwood, who demonstrated the truth of spirituality.

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Without the contributions, suggestions, inspiration and help of these and many other friends, this book would never have been attempted and certainly never finished.

Foreword

There are in anyone's life a few people who have an extraordinary and disproportionate influence upon it, sometimes quite unintentionally. In my own case Ben Curry stepped out of the shadows as if by fate pre-ordained.

I had been expected by my family to make a military career, and I had myself expected to do so until it was almost too late. I managed to complete four months of officer training at Sandhurst before realising that if I became any more desperate I would either go mad or have to kill myself. Although I enjoyed rushing about on assault courses and having ludicrous mock-battles with Ghurkas, I did not like being told what to do, and neither did I have any interest in telling anyone else what to do. Furthermore, those were the times when almost everyone of my background and generation just wanted to learn the guitar, grow our hair, pretend to be pacifists, and be the next Bob Dylan. In the army I felt as if I had been abducted by aliens, and I was convinced that the warrant officers who yelled insults in my face were actually psychopaths. A friend of my grandmother's died, and left me just enough money to buy myself out.

The atmosphere at home was exceedingly bad, as my parents were deeply disappointed in me, but I worked for some time as a garden stoneworker's assistant, and wondered if I had completely messed up my life before I had even started it. I was not remotely suited to any career that required me to wear a tie or be obedient.

Providence intervened in the form of a friend who had an uncle who was an anthropologist who knew a farmer in South America who needed a tutor for his wife's children. Don Ben was that farmer, and he came over to England to interview me. I motorcycled on a single-cylinder machine from Surrey to the West Country to see him. In order to determine whether I was tough enough for Colombia, Ben suggested we go skinny-dipping in a wild, rocky,

and freezing sea on a blustery and sunless day. I passed the test, and have been puzzling ever since as to how it demonstrated my suitability for the tropics.

The next time I saw Ben it was at the base camp of an RAF mountaineering expedition in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. It is a miracle to me that I ever found him. I had landed at Barranquilla airport, where I was instantly stupefied by the heat. Getting out of the aeroplane was like having a hot wet blanket suddenly popped over my head by kidnappers. From a phone box I rang up somebody with a Welsh name who worked for a farm machinery company called the Casa Inglesa. He was definitely not Welsh, but he came to the airport anyway, picked me up, and let me sleep the night at his house. The next morning he alerted the Casa Inglesa in Valledupar, and put me on a plane. It was a Dakota painted cheerfully in red, and it was too tired to go very high. We wove past hills and mountains, whilst air hostesses in red skirts and high heels tottered about heroically amid the turbulence with trays of orange juice. In Valledupar I was again given hospitality by a complete stranger, whose family spent its spare time watching a television that displayed only parallel black and white lines that travelled successively from the bottom of the screen to the top. The following morning I was put on a taxi to Atanquez. The taxi was a Russian jeep with dozens of people hanging off it at every possible angle, the road was a ruin, and Atanquez was a sad little town where everyone slept in hammocks and lived off yams and salted fish. I waited there until a mule-train of Kogi Indians arrived to collect supplies for the mountaineers. I once saw a television programme that maintained that the Kogi were a hidden race which had had no contact with the outside world for hundreds of years. That was rubbish of course, but it is true that not one of them spoke a word to me for three days. They were impressive people dressed in heavy white linen robes with domed hats of the same material. They carried antique muskets, and constantly pounded coca leaves with snail shells in a small gourd, which they then sucked off the pestle. They had sandals made of car tyres, and their calf muscles were as developed as a rugby player's thighs. On the three day climb I saw hummingbirds and condors, and the most fantastic vegetation that became more and more weird as the altitude increased. I was wide-eyed with wonder, and didn't feel like talking anyway.

When I arrived at the base camp Ben greeted me as if I had just stepped off a bus. The children were playing with a crashed Colombian army helicopter, wondering if any parts of it were worth detaching, the RAF expedition were splashing in a freezing lake in order to remove their dingleberries, and

Ben's wife Jill, looking very like the madonna, was nursing her new baby, Diccon. Jill was a sweet-natured, pretty, sensitive and artistic woman, who was probably a good influence on Ben, whose natural inclination is to be mischievous. The eldest child was Rachel, who was self-assured and as sweet-natured and pretty as her mother, but in entirely different ways. Marcus was the oldest boy, with a mop of blonde hair, a love of odd figures of speech, and an interest in teaching me all the more important obscenities and names for body parts in Castilian. Barnaby was a wonderful horseman, who rode a grey stallion called "Hippy," and Felix was a delightful, grinning little boy of about six. What I particularly remember about them all is their joie de vivre, their knowledge of the local fauna and flora, and their deftness with such things as machetes and lassoes. They were completely accomplished cowhands.

Up in the mountains the condensation froze on my sleeping bag at night. Ben, Barnaby and I climbed one of the mountains, from the top of which Ben guaranteed us a fantastic view over the Caribbean. When we finally reached the summit, a heavy cloud enveloped us, and all we could see was a stone cairn with a cross on the top, presumably erected to commemorate the mountain's dead.

Back at the hacienda I had a stomach upset for two weeks, and Ben showed me how to use a revolver in case the terrorists turned up and tried to drive the family away, or attempt a kidnapping. I settled into the life of the farm, which Ben very accurately evokes in the pages that follow, and which I therefore do not need to describe, and when I got home to England in order to go to Manchester University, I suffered the most terrible culture shock. I had stopped being British and had almost nothing in common with my fellow students. Britain and the British suddenly struck me as utterly incomprehensible and peculiar. I have still not properly adapted, and can hardly imagine what it might be like to try and set a novel in England.

That Ben is a remarkable man who has led a remarkable life is evident in his account of it. Like many people he has contradictory qualities that emerge at different times, except that in Ben's case his personality is several times larger than the European average. Sometimes Ben is reflective and philosophical, taking stoical pleasure in the wisdom he has accumulated over a long life, and sometimes gleefully badly behaved. I remember him warning me in very picturesque and graphic terms not to get too attached to Rachel, but in general Ben also enjoys other peoples' misbehaviour, relating their stupidities or accidents with considerable relish.

Ben is the Don Quijxote of Colombia. He loves adventures, and when in adventurous mode, is not at all interested in being sensible. He is quite prepared to spend all day beneath an implacable sun with a metal detector, looking for treasure in some godforsaken savannah, just because somebody dreamed it was there and sold him the right to dream. He enjoys parlous situations, and would probably throw himself into the path of an axe-murderer in order to see what happens. He enjoys trekking off to meet terrorists, and might even be pleased when his Land Rover breaks down in the middle of a raging torrent, because then he will have all the fun of finding an ingenious wheeze for getting himself out of the mess.

Ben has a kind of blunt and provocative humour which consists partly of saying the uncomfortable truth with a sweet smile, and partly of making outrageous suggestions whose seriousness or levity it is impossible for an outsider to judge. Everyone who knows Ben becomes rapidly very fond of him, but it is necessary first to learn how to cope with this particular quirk of his nature. People who have read my South American trilogy will realise that in order to create the character of Don Emanuel, I greatly exaggerated Ben's characteristics, and then put him into situations that were purely invented. It is very much to his credit (and my relief) that he has never sued me for defamation, and does not bear me a grudge.

Most importantly, Ben is someone who loves. He loved his wife, and he loves his children and stepchildren. This much is ordinary, but Ben also loves Colombia. He loves the mountains, the plants, the weather, even the nastier animals. Ben loved his hacienda, which he carved out of the wilderness, and loved his cattle for making his dream a reality. He loved his workers, and had the reputation of being the best employer in the region. Ben loves Colombia so much that he became a Colombian citizen when there was no need for it.

Colombia invariably betrays her lovers, and Ben has fallen victim to its political chaos, its institutional corruption, and its wondrously self-defeating perversity. Because of this he has lost his entire life's work, and has been reduced to living pennilessly on a beach far away from his farm and all the things that he struggled so heroically to create out of nothing.

To Ben I say thank you for lifting me out of England at exactly the right time in my life, and thereby changing the entire course of it. I suppose I might still have become a writer, but I would have been writing mediocre stuff about self-absorbed intellectuals having their dinner parties in North London. Thank you for saving me from that most terrible literary fate.

Thank you also for the great entertainment that you have always provided, and the many years of unavoidably intermittent friendship. Thank you too for this book which is a damn good read, and for giving me the honour of writing its foreword. I enjoyed every word of it, and only wish that it was longer. May it bring you much satisfaction, much well-deserved acclaim, and (as you might put it) may it get you off the bones of your ass.

—Louis de Bernières

Louis de Bernières is the award-winning author of several books including *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1994), *Birds Without Wings* (2004), *A Partisan's Daughter* (2008) and *Notwithstanding: English Village Stories* (2009). He dedicated his first book, *The War of Don Emanuel's Nether Parts,* to "The incorrigible Don Benjamin," who here gives his account of his adventures as the author of *Curucucú.*

ONE

A Chance Anecdote

I am a part of all that I have met
yet all experience is an arch
wherethro' gleams that untravell'd world
whose margins fade for ever and for ever when I move

— Alfred Lord Tennyson

Howler monkeys perched in a wild fig tree glared at our approaching jeep and roared in disapproval as it clattered over a protruding root growing across the forest roadway. A flock of macaws screeched indignantly and took to flight. Only a pair of blue morpho butterflies wafting peacefully through the shaded undergrowth seemed unperturbed by our intrusion. Ranch work had kept us occupied longer than we'd expected that afternoon in November 1957 and my host, Roland, was hurrying to show me a five hundred acre homestead before the sun set.

"The boundary starts just over there," he shouted above the din. It's a bargain. The owner's only asking the equivalent of five hundred pounds.

We passed under a feathery leafed archway of branches sprouted from rooted fence posts* lining both sides of the entrance track and came to a clearing where two wattle-walled, palm-thatched cottages stood amongst scattered fruit trees and clumps of wild flowers.

Roland's "Halloo" was met with silence.

"Looks like no one's here," he said, "but I'm sure it's O.K. with the owner for you to look around."

**Gliricidia sepum*, a copiously forked tree of the Leguminosea found throughout the tropics. Branches cut for posts take root and form a living fence.

Noticing that the plank door of the nearest cottage was held shut by a piece of string looped over a bent nail, I took Roland at his word. The door swung backwards and I looked into an empty room where evening sunlight stretched my shadow across the smooth earth floor to a whitewashed wall.

An open sided kitchen occupied one end of the second cottage. Balanced on three stones placed on top of a waist-high hearth, an aluminum cooking pot held a broken machete blade and spoons carved from the rind of a gourd. Four chairs, ingeniously constructed from twisted tree branches, encircled a roughly hewn table, and tucked between overlapping palm fronds in the roof I noticed an assortment of tin soup bowls and plates. The rest of the building was a communal bedroom. Ropes for securing hammocks dangled from the roof's crossbeams and pegs for hanging clothes protruded from the walls. From a rafter a resident gecko gazed at me inquisitively and swished its tail.

Outside, near toucans guzzling fallen ripe guavas, was a well trodden path which I followed to a stream cascading into pool. Kneeling, I tasted a handful of water and smiled in appreciation. Small fish darted around the drops as they fell from my beard; a basilisk lizard, defying gravity, scuttled over the water to the opposite side and two mottled butterflies flew to the trunk of a grey-barked tree, crackled their wings head downwards and disappeared in the protective coloration of the background. Everything I'd seen in the homestead seemed to co-exist in harmony and I was entranced.

"What do you think of the place?" shouted Roland. "Tomorrow, if you like, I'll take you to the river on the far boundary. It's too late to see it properly now."

As I came into view he started to reverse the jeep.

"Careful! There's a clump of flowers behind you."

"Something special about them?" he asked in surprise.

"I'm not sure but they're a part of something that is special about this homestead. What are they called?"

"Those? The natives call them *Caracucho*."

An owl-like bird alighted on a post.

"And that bird?" I asked.

"*Curucucú*."

Pleased by the cadence of those unusual names, I clambered into my seat and, in the rapidly descending dusk, we started back to Roland's ranch.

"Don't have to look more than once at the lush vegetation to know the homestead's got good soil," he said. "The owner says it's over a metre deep. As soon as the railroad line from the interior to the Caribbean is completed, land

hereabouts is going to shoot up in value. There's plenty of labour in the village, the farm has good timber and that stream is pure spring water safe to drink." Roland turned and gave me an encouraging grin." Buy the place. I'd sure like to have you as a neighbour."

"Hold on a minute! I'd thought of crewing on a yacht crossing the Pacific. There are dozens of islands I've always longed to see, and there's an uncle in Africa to visit before settling down."

"Settling down to what?"

"I haven't decided yet but I doubt if it'll be nine-to-five office work. I don't like city life and I'm not really an academic. My life seems to be guided by chance encounters." I paused and added confidently, "Something'll turn up."

"Look, pal, you don't often find good quality land like this at a pound per acre. It's a real bargain. Give it a try. If after a year it doesn't work out, you can sell it and go on to those islands in the Pacific. They're not going anywhere."

"But I don't know anything about tropical farming."

"In this climate you don't need to. Just follow nature. This is virgin soil free of diseases. Common sense tells you when things need a helping hand but most everything here thrives by itself. Look at the natives! If they can make a living, you should do brilliantly. I've been watching you for a month and there's not a job that seems to be beyond you or one you're unwilling to try. We get on. People like you. Not many people get the opportunity to start off in life as their own boss."

In England I'd given up any idea of farming or raising cattle. None of my relations were going to leave me several hundred acres and starting an agricultural venture with a mortgage was risking a life of penury. A couple of bad seasons or an outbreak of foot and mouth would mean either a foreclosure or spending the rest of my life working as an unremunerated bank asset.

Five hundred acres of fertile land, a pure water stream and a boundary river for five hundred pounds! It was certainly worth some serious thought. My capital wouldn't cover the costs of preparing and planting land with machinery. I'd have to clear the land with a machete, burn the vegetation when it was dry and, to keep myself solvent, plant a cash crop of maize. The first year or so would certainly be more slog than fun but, if I scattered enough grass seed, once the local ranchers had accepted me and seen my pasture, surely one of them would give me cattle in partnership.

If I bought the homestead a lot of people would say I wasn't making use of my Cambridge University degree, that I was turning my back on the culture

that had made me what I was, and that embarking on a farming enterprise in a third world country without a tractor, implements or livestock was tantamount to lunacy. I'd have to produce some pretty impressive long term results if I were to show that my life hadn't been wasted, but dreams would never become reality if every effort to achieve them had to previously pass the censure of uninvited critics. Sod them! Sooner or later the decision of how I spent my life had to be mine. Working for a couple of years in the back woods of Colombia wouldn't necessarily be an unprofitable experience. Even if at the end it came to nothing financially, I would know myself a great deal better. Learning to recognize what values were real and which illusionary would be more than many people achieve in a life time. Moreover, it might be fun. What a lark it would be to construct a dam across the stream and divert an elevated leat to a water turbine for generating electricity! I was at an age when I disregarded conventional inhibitions with the ebullience of youth. If I could take what was unpalatable without resentment, and either accept or overcome difficulties as trials in the art of living, I was confident that I would find more to smile over than to make me weep.

It's curious how a chance anecdote can embark one on a series of unforeseen events. I would never have reached Colombia let alone Roland's ranch and the homestead if I had missed John Corner's University lecture on "The Explosive Spore Dispersal Mechanisms of Fungi."

Corner looked up from his lectern, gave us one of his engaging smiles and remarked, "I don't suppose any of you have ever had the opportunity of firing old forty-pound cannons?"

Aware that he was about to share one of the memories from his remarkable life that made his lectures unique, we had settled ourselves more comfortably and given him our rapt attention. Removing his spectacles and beginning to polish them, he described being sent to a Caribbean island by boat on one of the botanical missions of his youth and noticing, as he entered the harbor, old cannons sticking out from gun emplacements lining the parapet of the ancient fort guarding the town.

"Everything was mellowed under the tropical sun and the tempo of life seemed idyllically free from stress. Boys scampered up coconut palms to fell green nuts for their milk; women cooked breadfruit; men fished from hand-hewn canoes. Girls, balancing bunches of bananas on their heads, sauntered with sensual grace along the paths leaving their family small-holdings to the village. It was a friendly community whose unhurried way of life gave peo-

ple time to smile benevolently at groups of carefree children playing in the street.

"The District Officer had few visitors, and when we had finished our official business he pressed me to spend the night at the Residence. After dinner he challenged me to a game of chess which I won. Magnanimously, possibly rashly, he asked me what I would like as a reward. Suddenly I had this marvelous idea. Shall I tell you what it was?"

Encouraged by our murmured assent, Corner continued.

"I reminded him that the next day was the King's official birthday and to fire the old cannons in the fort would be an appropriate recognition of the event. My host laughed delightedly at the suggestion and ordered his steward to bring another bottle of Scotch. The islanders possess an amazing bush telegraph service and by the following morning not only did everyone know of our plan but with unanimous accord had decided to take a day off. Homes were abandoned, the bank, the school and offices were shut and, in a festive mood, old and young gathered at the fort where a few enterprising families set up stalls selling home brewed alcoholic beverage by the calabash. To give the occasion respectability, pensioned army officers wore their medals, primed the cannons and prepared the touch holes. The District Officer, astride a parapet, delivered a brief but dignified speech. At his signal everybody shouted 'God save the King' and I, with other local dignitaries, was handed a lighted taper to ignite our appointed fuses. I can still visualize the scene. As a series of mighty BOOMS sent compressed rat's nests and flakes of rust shooting across the bay, startled bats emerged from nooks and crannies in the masonry and, in an impromptu flyover, swooped and darted around our heads."

Wrinkles of pleasure from the memory creased Corner's face and then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "Opportunities happen when they will. You can't force their pace or foresee the outcome but when they arrive be receptive. Some may change your life."

I had been left in a daydream wandering barefoot along a coral sand beach. Sparkling turquoise water lapped at my feet, a parrot screeched "pieces of eight," maidens offered me tropical fruits and the pressures of competitive academia faded into insignificance. A field botanist had moments of carefree enjoyment denied their more professionally ambitious colleagues who, behind laboratory walls, competed for academic advancement by publishing erudite monographs. What marvellous fun it would be to join a University expedition to some off-beat region of the globe!

Fortuitously in my second year I was introduced to Roger, a brilliant, debonair Edwardian. Even though he always wore a cravat or tie and I open necked shirts, we became great friends. I sometimes wondered if his determination to persevere unswervingly what he believed to be correct was influenced by his landlady, the widow of an Antarctic explorer whose equipment had been returned after what Roger referred to as "his unfortunate trip." Every morning she breakfasted at a table on her open air terrace paying tribute to the fortitude of her late husband by munching his favourite expedition food of raw porridge oats. No sub-zero gale sweeping across the fens could deter her. On such occasions, by encasing her head in his balaclava and fleetingly lifting its hem, she contrived to spoon the few oats that hadn't been blown away by the wind into her mouth.

Roger's parents were distinguished horticulturists and I was not surprised to learn that he and four other knowledgeable botanists were planning a long vacation expedition to collect bryophytes in Yugoslavia. For reasons which still elude me, as I could scarcely distinguish a moss from a leafy liverwort, he invited me to join them. It is not easy to find unrecorded plants in Europe. For centuries avid botanists have scoured the continent for additions to herbaria. Thus, it was greatly to the credit of the expedition's meticulous work that the collection was found to contain two previously unrecorded species for the Balkans. Using this kudos to full advantage, we agreed to plan another expedition after our graduation and explore a more distant part of the world.

That was the decade when Colonel Hunt's expedition to the Himalayas gave Hillary and Tensing the opportunity to make the first ascent of Mount Everest. The film recording their saga had world-wide success and produced an unexpected cash surplus which had to be spent in order to wind up the expedition's accounts with a zero balance. To achieve that end, grants were made available to finance approved scientific expeditions to mountainous areas. Shedding one of our group and replacing him with a cinematographer, we scrutinized maps for accessible but, to the world in general, unknown mountain ranges. We chose the Sierra Nevada del Cocuy in Boyacá, Colombia. The flora was uncharted, there were no recorded ascents for some of the peaks, and it would be interesting to compare England with a South American third world country where none of us had ever been. Rather grandly we called ourselves "The Cambridge Expedition to the Colombian Cordillera Oriental 1957."

According to our capabilities—and limitations—the expedition leader,

Peter Grubb, assigned us tasks. Roger and I were put in charge of soliciting grants from Trusts and Foundations, and food and equipment from firms known to be sympathetic to Oxbridge requests. "When in doubt, press on regardless," was Roger's motto and it always seemed to get results (although later, in a moment of confidence, he admitted that applying it to his final examinations had probably been detrimental to his being awarded a first class degree).

In addition to the Mount Everest Foundation, we received help from the Shell Oil Company. Possibly it was hoped that some of us would join their Colombian team analyzing core samples for spores indicating oil rich strata. Perhaps their Oxbridge employees felt a surge of nostalgia for their Alma Maters and wished to be associated once again in University projects. In either case, Shell Oil (Colombia) offered us transport from Bogotá to the Sierra Nevada del Cocuy and, once there, the use of ten mules. To celebrate all these developments and meet some of our sponsors, the expedition members were invited to a cocktail party in Shell Mex House, London.

Access to a well-stocked bar and the continuous circulation of waiters carrying trays laden with drinks and snacks put us at our ease and in less than half an hour we were convinced that Shell Oil was a jolly decent company. At that point, a serenely mellowed Roger found himself questioned by a distinguished looking gentleman concerning the purpose of our previous expedition. Pursing his lips, Roger pontificated, "You are no doubt aware of those funny little mossy plants that one usually treads on but never really notices. Well, in scientific nomenclature they're known as bryophytes." Beckoning the gentleman to come closer, Roger leaned forward and, as though imparting a piece of classified information, confided, "We collected 'em."

Before Roger had a chance to elucidate on other more meaningful accomplishments, a waiter excused himself for interrupting and announced, "Professor, there's an urgent telephone call for you in the main lobby."

Somewhat put out by the professor's abrupt departure, but true to his motto, Roger queried, "Waiter, who was that worthy gentleman?"

"Professor Adams, sir, is the President of the Royal Society."

"Ah yes. I remember the name. Perhaps we'll be able to continue our little chat on another occasion."

I don't believe any of us were ever purposely disrespectful where manners or courtesy were due. Definitely not Roger. But underlying Cold War tensions were shaking the foundations of blind subservience to tradition. We were the

first generation to live under the threat of an atomic holocaust and I, certainly, was repulsed by a strategy for world peace based on stockpiling weapons of mass destruction. If ever used, the least harmful scenario would be indiscriminate, international homicide, the worst, the annihilation of life on earth. Quite apart from moral considerations, I was not content to be a dutiful but expedient puppet pending a sacrificial order from the Old Men in Whitehall whose wisdom had so often been conspicuously absent.

If my views were unconventional, they were the outcome of an unusual background. My father, W. B. Curry, was the founding headmaster of Dartington Hall School in Devon. Allowed by the trustees, Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst, to practice what he preached—and greatly influenced by the ideals of Bertrand Russell—he, my mother Ena Isherwood and her sister Margaret, pioneered progressive education in England. Although my parents divorced, my memories are of a happy childhood. My aunts and uncles took a kindly interest in my upbringing but what impressed me the most was the sheer goodness of my maternal grandfather, A.A. Isherwood, the vicar of a small village in Wiltshire. Before members of his family were allowed to sit down to their Christmas dinner, each had taken a plate of food, suspended in a starched linen napkin, to a destitute parishioner.

At the outbreak of the Second World War I was evacuated with my mother and elder sister to the United States of America. Funds taken out of England at that time were strictly controlled. For the first few months my sister and I boarded with friends in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where we attended the Shady Hill school. This freed our mother to work for the "Save the Children Organization" and find foster parents for other evacuee children. At the end of our first year in the States she was offered a teaching post in Colorado and we moved west. One of my aunts, Helen Isherwood, who had been working in America for several years, offered to pool her resources with any money that my mother had been able to save from her salary and buy a home for us all in the equitable climate of Southern California. There was just enough to purchase a simple wooden-frame house with a garden shed in Laguna Beach. The seller, in sympathy with our impecunious state, kindly left us four beds, a refrigerator and a stove. At the foot of my cot in the shed was a workbench that looked as though it had been put together from pieces of drift-wood. I walked along the beach looking for what else had been washed up by the sea that could be nailed together and furnished our dining room with a much needed table. In the pioneer climate of California it was accepted that youngsters be

useful. During weekends, and school holidays, my sister worked as a waitress or babysitter and I apprenticed myself to a neighbor who spent Saturdays and Sundays building an extension to his house. Barefoot and clad in shorts, I also cut lawns, washed cars and at the end of the day collected soft drink bottles—discarded along the shoreline by picnickers—which I returned to a supermarket for their refundable value. My sister and I never thought it a hardship to contribute to improving the standard of living in our home. We were both proud and happy to be able to do so.

In 1944 I was awarded a scholarship to Fountain Valley, a select boarding school for sons of the wealthy, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains on the plains near Colorado Springs. It exposed me to a different world. Boys boasted about the price of their parents' new cars, I won an arts award for an inlaid chess board that I made in the carpentry class and another pupil introduced me to what was commonly done on the night before the weekly change of sheets. Unluckily in my first year I was hospitalized with bulbar infantile paralysis. It is probable that I would not have recovered had it not been for Ishbel Campbell, the English master's wife, who handed her signed chequebook to my mother to pay for the expenses of my recuperation. That unforgettable gesture of generosity and trust changed my perception of friendship.

Six years later when I had regained my health and graduated from Fountain Valley, I returned to Dartington to attend my father's co-educational school. There, children had always been allowed to develop non academic skills but in the austere post-war conditions of England when costs were rising but the school's income remained fixed, student help in maintenance became an economic necessity. For the first hour of each school day every pupil in the senior school participated in some aspect of the work associated with keeping the buildings and their contents in good working order. This "useful work," as it was called, altered the students' attitude toward responsibility. Previously it had been assumed that "someone else" would do the manual work and that furnishings and equipment were there to be used or abused. Finding the faults of, and fixing, worn out electrical machinery, mending broken furniture, glazing windows, cleaning rooms and helping in the kitchen developed not only unsuspected skills but a proprietary feeling about the school where everyone's effort was appreciated.

When in 1925 Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst purchased the manor house and estate known as Dartington Hall near Totnes, Devon—once owned by John Holland, the half-brother of King Richard II—their vision was to revi-

Oxen pulling a primitive plough.

talize the lives of the residents in the economically depressed area. They began by financing a wide range of rural industries, a progressive school and creating a community where every aspect of the arts could co-exist and flourish. I spent two exciting years there gaining an appreciation of the community that develops when dedicated professionals—many of whom were permanent residents—are encouraged to add their expertise and ideas to enriching society. Then, in 1953 I was accepted by Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, to study for a degree in Natural Science.

On the day I received my degree, I was free to do whatever I chose. I had no dependants, a few savings and an ambition to see the world. The expedition to Colombia would be a stepping stone to unimagined adventures.

With funds and equipment collected, the expedition sailed in July 1957 on *La Reina del Mar*, one of the last passenger liners to make regular runs from Liverpool to South America. Cartagena, the fortified treasure city

Close-up of a primitive wooden plough being used.

where the *conquistadores* stored New World gold before shipping it to Spain, welcomed us to Colombia. Had the British Consul not previously arranged for our expedition gear to by-pass the usual venal import procedure, our belongings would have been pillaged by customs officials. Denied any baksheesh from us, they compensated by tearing furiously into the baggage of returning citizens. It was our first lesson in survival techniques necessary to prosper in Colombia.

Members of the British community greeted us at Bogotá airport and, hospitably dividing us among their homes, generously wined and dined us for a week. Then we climbed into two Shell Oil trucks and were off to Guicán, the highest village in the Sierra Nevada del Cocuy. The Andean scenery was superb, the air crisp and clean. *Campesinos** with black homburgs firmly pulled down to their ears and *ruanas** flung back over their shoulders, hoed

*Country folk, farmers and others whose livelihood depends on rural occupations. Synonymous with the term "peasant" but without derogatory overtones.

strips of potatoes. Similarly dressed small children with ruddy cheeks and shy smiles tended tethered cattle foraging between fences and the roadway. Occasionally we passed fields being tilled by yoked oxen pulling a simple wooden plough. It was all very new to us and we frequently asked the drivers to stop so that we could take photographs or collect specimens of spectacular flowering plants. White, yellow and scarlet daturas—some reputedly emitting narcotic odors at night—adorned peasant doorways and at the side of the road grew unfamiliar shrubs with brilliant pink and purple flowers that even Peter Grubb could only identify as belonging to the family *Melastomataceae*.

The first evening we reached Capitanejo, a small township situated in a valley at the base of the Sierra Nevada del Cocuy. Snow-capped peaks, glistening among wisps of cloud, looked cold, challenging and enticing. Perched on the roof of the only hostel, a row of scrawny vultures stretched their necks and glowered at us hungrily. We'd been regaled, before leaving Bogotá, with macabre accounts of pieces of missing persons appearing in the kitchen stews of such places. Without a single dissent, we declined the owner's offer of accommodation and, pitching our tents between the trucks, slept at the side of the road.

We received a more gracious reception in Guicán. Upon reading the letters of introduction supplied to us in Bogotá, the town's courtly patriarch, Dr. Nepomuceno Arango, respected political scientist, lawyer and scion of colonial estates, ushered us into a drawing room furnished with ornately brocaded chairs. He and Roger immediately recognized in each other their mutual gentility and for the remainder of our stay we were received in Guicán as personages of note. Roger's charm combined with the academic brilliance of our leader, Peter Grubb, persuaded Dr. Arango that we were worthy of his patronage and to our joy he sent a message to Don Juan de la Hoz, the administrator of his high cordillera estate, Hacienda Ritacuba, stating that a paddock was to be reserved for our mules and the barn made available for our use. It became more than a base camp where we slept and stored gear while foraying into the surrounding mountains, it became a home where Don Juan's family always made us feel welcome.

"As you will be working in the countryside for the next two months," our patron cautioned, "you may come across Marxist agents inciting peasants to overthrow the government. I must warn you that you will loose your welcome

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*Native woven blankets squares worn as a cape with a slit in the middle for the head.

if you have anything to do with them."

"Are they a threat to Colombia's stability?" I asked.

"Since Simon Bolivar's battles with Spain, that led to our becoming a sovereign republic in 1830, two political parties, the Liberals and Conservatives, have controlled Colombia. As you may know, during the last hundred and twenty-seven years they've jockeyed for power by engaging in nine brutal civil wars and dozens of minor skirmishes. Despite political fanatics slaughtering each other by barbaric methods such as that of a thousand cuts, the redeeming feature—if one can call it that—is that every confrontation was an internal dispute between citizens who cared about the good of their section of Colombia. Marxism is an alien menace led by agitators financed, controlled and brainwashed by Russia whose object is disrupting and causing chaos to the social stability of our country. Clearly, they have to be dealt with."

"Brutality is a global phenomena," I said. "In England, a few centuries ago, opponents of the crown, proven guilty of treason or not, could be publicly hung, drawn, and quartered and have their heads skewered on a spike on London Bridge. Please rest assured, Doctor Arango, that none of us have the slightest intention of encouraging Marxist agitators here or anywhere else. The possibility of meeting them, though, is disturbing. May I respectfully ask you a question concerning the reason for their presence?"

"Please do."

"Does the Marxist propaganda, as I understand it, that the poor are getting poorer and the rich richer correspond to the reality of most present-day Colombians?"

"Answering for the vast majority of modern Colombians, the reply is a categorical no. The new generation is on the threshold of a brighter future than their parents ever thought possible. I'm assured that in less than twelve months the Liberal and Conservative politicians will have adopted a system of peacefully alternating governments every four years with an agreement called *El Frente Nacional*. Education, communication technology and mass produced luxury goods are providing the conditions where nobody will be excluded from a middle class standard of living. Peasant society as you see it today will have largely disappeared by the end of this century. If you have criticisms about present conditions in Colombia, reflect for a minute on the thought that our respective countries belong to different centuries and Democracy evolves slowly."

"Yes," I replied, "that's certainly so. My mother was a suffragette. She often

reminded me that while the Magna Charter was signed centuries ago, women in England only gained the vote in 1917."

Dr. Arango smiled appreciatively. "Thank you for mentioning that," he said. "In certain aspects Colombia is still feudal. Citizens have the right to vote and own their homes and businesses but ultimate power is still held by the large land owners who expect allegiance in return for protection and favors. Every village has a Catholic church and, as was recently common in Europe, the priest levies an ecclesiastical tax of ten percent on all agricultural produce. But traditions are crumbling. Modern Colombians, whether Liberal or Conservative, Catholic or Evangelical, neither accept nor believe that their future be limited by their parent's position in society. I promise you one thing, however, while you're under my patronage nobody in Guicán will dare bother you."

We each thanked Doctor Arango for his kind welcome and promised to be worthy of his trust

Situated at an altitude of about twelve thousand feet, Hacienda Ritacuba's buildings, adobe walled and roofed with Spanish tiles, stood around three sides of a cobbled courtyard. At dusk a palpable coldness descended from the permanent snow on the adjacent peaks. In one wing Don Juan de la Hoz lived with his wife and herd of children. In the other were the rooms reserved for Doctor Arango. In the middle section was the barn allotted for our use and the kitchen—the only room with any warmth and the communal meeting place even though every permanent fixture in it was blackened with soot. From the one and only chair, Don Juan's wife, attired in sensible black shoes, long black dress, black *ruana* and a black homburg hat perched above a luxuriant black plait, supervised the activities of her household. Everyone else sat on logs arranged in a circle around the open fire which was never allowed to go out. From a trestle, hung a black iron cauldron containing the day's stew. It bubbled constantly and, when the level dropped, was replenished with whatever was at hand and thought edible. In the weeks we were there we never saw the pot either emptied or washed. The kitchen lacked windows and the only rays of light to penetrate the gloom came through chinks in the walls, as the doorway was usually shut to keep out icy draughts. Smoke filled the kitchen before escaping through a specially designed hole in the roof. From opaque depths emerged and disappeared poor relations, the family idiot* and various dogs. Sometimes we were invited for a meal. Choosing a place on the commu-

*Discretely displayed by many families as proof of the purity of their Spanish lineage.

nal log, we balanced bowls of stew thick with potatoes, broad beans and onions. What couldn't be managed with the wooden spoon provided was picked up with our fingers. At times the stew contained curious cross sections of meat which, when we felt observed, we politely chewed and swallowed. But, when nobody was looking, surreptitiously passed to the ever-hungry dogs behind us. After the meal we went outside and rinsed our hands and mouths in a glacier fed stream which provided water for the kitchen.

Don Juan's eldest daughter, whom we nicknamed "Snowflake," was a cheerful, simple soul, somewhat plainer than pretty and of the ample proportions popular in proletarian statuary. Although thirty years old she had remained unmarried, a state attributed to her penchant for embracing any dancing partner in a manner that left his feet dangling in the air as she twirled him around. Not only had she inherited her father's booming voice by which, we were told, she had once stood at the top of a ridge beside their house and ordered provisions from the shops in Guicán a thousand feet below, but had developed formidable pectoral muscles by lifting two hundred pound sacks of potatoes on to the backs of mules.

Once a week at the crack of dawn she would appear in the doorway to the barn where we would be lying warmly in our sleeping bags and ask for volunteers. She was clearly smitten by Roger's impeccable manners and winked at him invitingly, although for the help she needed she might as well have winked at any of us for we were equally incompetent. Taking turns, two of us would put on our anoraks and go out into the freezing mist of the courtyard. Her brothers were never there. Having caught ten mules and tied them to posts in the courtyard with their cargo saddles securely cinched, they had left Snowflake to her own devices and gone off to the fields to dig more potatoes. To avoid being kicked, Snowflake would take off her *ruana* and drape it over the head of the mule to be loaded so that it couldn't see what was happening. Then, casually picking up a sack of potatoes, she would place it against one side of the cargo saddle in the hope that we were doing the same on the other side. It may have been the lack of breakfast or that lifting two-hundred-pound sacks of potatoes shoulder high was a knack that Cambridge had failed to teach, but in either case we could seldom raise our sack more than a couple of feet off the ground. With the indulgent smile of a fond mother wishing to spare her retarded children humiliation, Snowflake would tell us to keep the one she had just lifted where it was, move around the mule and toss the second sack into a position where it balanced the one we were hold-

ing. Supporting its bulk on a raised knee she would tie the tops of the two sacks together and with a few more twists and turns of rope secure the first mule load.

Learning skills in the art of primitive living by members of Don Juan's family was a salutary experience.

Ricker Laboratories had commissioned us to collect a hundred pounds of the sessile alpine plant, *Draba litamo*, reputed to contain medicinal properties. On the day we climbed to its habitat along the snow line, Roger felt ill. We left him in Dr Arango's guest bedroom, where Snowflake assured us she would happily provide his meals. Don Juan's eldest son, Pedro, lent me his horse and as soon as Fermin, his brother, had secured our equipment to the mule saddles we set off for the three-day trip necessary to gather and sun dry the requested plants which grew above a glacial lake at about fourteen thousand feet. On arrival we pitched our tents and spread a ground sheet over a sun-warmed slab of rock where Pedro could turn the gathered material. The morning's moderate wind and open sky made perfect conditions for drying but, as the afternoon advanced, clouds threatening rain compelled a halt to the day's work. Pedro mentioned that the glacial lake had been stocked with trout and that he'd brought a fish hook. The chance to change our diet overcame angler etiquette. We baited his hook with a lump of mutton fat, tied it with a boot lace to a tent pole and told him to try his luck. A hungry trout snapped at the unexpected treat, leapt into the air and crashed back fighting. Pedro whooped in excitement and we all rushed down to help. Fermin with another tent pole, I with a .22 rifle.

"Don't let it go, Pedro," I shouted. "We're on our way!"

Fermin waited for the trout to swerve near the bank. Intending to kill the approaching fish with a wallop on the head he leaned forward to strike but slipped. The spike at the tip of the descending tent pole severed the boot lace and the stupefied fish reeled away out of reach. I took aim and fired. My shot stopped the trout but brought it no nearer. Thinking the lake could not be much colder than the English Channel, I stripped, swam out and brought back our supper.

My blue goose flesh discouraged any further attempt at fishing so we climbed back to where we'd left our gear and I lit our primus stove. Fermin said he knew a recipe for cooking trout and we left him to prepare the evening

meal. As we were all hungry, the mashed trout and potatoes fried in mutton fat and topped with sliced spring onions seemed delicious.

If we wondered how Roger was faring, little did we imagine that he was being offered one of Snowflake's culinary specialties.

"She appeared in the doorway," he told us on our return, "and asked if I was hungry. I'd eaten virtually nothing for two days and was famished. Images of my mother's Sunday lunches flitted through my mind: a haunch of beef, golden Yorkshire puddings, roast potatoes with gravy, Brussels sprouts, gleaming tableware and a carefully selected claret waiting to be poured from a cut glass decanter. Snowflake, glowing like an animal on heat, reappeared carrying my supper on an oval plate. I struggled eagerly into a sitting position to see what she had brought. Stretched between two potatoes at the far end of the platter lay the full length of something which must have belonged to a bull." Roger winced at the memory. Since Snowflake's offering he had tightly shut his eyes and remained in a prostrate position waiting for our return.

"Well? Go on. Tell us. What was it?" we naively queried.

"Peering at me over the edge of the platter was the knob of a boiled penis."

Roger waited until we had wiped the tears of laughter from our eyes and then suggested that if what he'd seen were cut into short lengths they would be indistinguishable from the cross sections in the kitchen stews that we had so often felt obliged to swallow.

The Cocuy Massif extends on a north-south axis. At the end of the first month, having completed a representative collection from the western vegetative zones, we loaded our equipment on to the mules and set off to a cabin at Cobagón on the eastern flank. Our path zigzagged upwards to the *páramos* where a stiff wind sent clouds leap-frogging exuberantly over the summit ridge. Even the mules felt the exhilaration in the air. Kicking up their heels, they scampered into a pasture scattering a flock of sheep up a hillside. It took the combined effort of ourselves and two small shepherd boys to coax our recalcitrant pack animals back to the trail.

Giant *espeletias** brooded on the high moorland *páramo* like a massed array of hooded friars. Many a traveller caught in a mountain blizzard has saved himself from hypothermia by putting together a crude "log type" cabin

*A plant of the *Compositae* unique to the northern Andes, growing to three metres in height and locally known as *frailejones*.

The author on Pedro's borrowed horse crossing the páramo.

shelter from fallen stems and warming himself by a fire made by igniting the resinous leaves.

Skirting around the base of the snow line, we crossed the divide and descended into a belt of cloud forest. Along mist dampened branches bromeliads of the genus *Tillandsia*, mosses, the ubiquitous lichen *Usnea* and spectacular orchids vied for space. Collecting specimens meant a hazardous clamber through trellises of slimy aerial roots beneath which weird fibrous growths, resembling tentacles of some giant octopus, entangled those who fell.

Rumbling cumulus clouds streaked with flashes of lightning persuaded us to seek accommodation for the night in a mountain hostel. There were two bedrooms, one for women and the other for men. In each a wide communal bed, constructed of split saplings laid at right angles over two horizontal logs, was wedged between opposing walls five feet six inches apart. Three uncured sheepskins sewn side by side with the wool facing up served as a mattress. The coverlet consisted of three more skins sewn side by side with the wool

Mules laden with the expedition's equipment crossing the páramo between Guicán and Cobagón.

facing down. An impediment to a good night's rest was the differing lengths of bodies lying next to each other and the consequent unsolicited and occasionally intimate proximity of another's knee. Moreover, a tug of war using the top sheepskin inevitably took place between those lying at the edges of the bed. When the person on one side rolled over and faced outwards he was obliged to pull the sheepskins over his knees to keep them warm. That action uncovered the person on the other side, who yanked the coverlet back again. The caress of unwashed sheepskin pulled back and forth over the faces of our group in the middle snapped the willingness some had expressed to expose themselves to a genuine ethnic experience. Crawling over cursing bodies they disappeared into a cold mountain rain to pitch tents on uneven stony ground.

In the morning it was difficult to decide who had fared the worst, those on the split saplings or those on the stones. We all looked dishevelled. All of us, that is, except Roger. Never for one moment had he entertained the notion of

sharing a communal bed. He had pitched his tent on the only level and smooth spot available and, upon retiring, had neatly stretched his trousers beneath his inflated air-bed. As usual, he emerged dry shaved, a crease in his trouser leg, boots gleaming, and wearing a clean cravat. From under the rim of the deer stalker hat set jauntily on his head he initially regarded us as an unfamiliar species. Then, courteously enquiring whether we had slept well, he savoured an early morning cup of coffee sent especially to him from the hostel kitchen by the owner's wife. She could tell who was important. Several hours of being outside in the pure mountain air were necessary for the rest of us to clear from our nostrils the pungent odours of rancid sheep's wool and muleteer's sweat.

The cabin at Cobagón stood in the middle of a forest clearing. It belonged to Don Juan. No one lived there permanently but the door was left unlocked so that weary travellers could take advantage of its shelter. It suited our purposes admirably. There were two rooms. The first, a rudimentary kitchen with a raised hearth and trestle table. The second, a bed room large enough for us to spread our sleeping bags and equipment. Wild turkeys provided us with meat and close by ran a stream with water a few degrees above freezing in which it was bearable to wash. We established a harmonious work routine. Every morning the mules not needed for an excursion were hobbled and allowed to forage in an unfenced paddock. The muleteers then swept the ground around the cabin, collected firewood, put new palm leaves in the roof where old ones had rotted, hunted for game, and generally helped us in any way they could. We went in pairs to collect plants and usually found enough new material to keep us constantly occupied sorting and labelling material before carefully arranging it in our portable plant presses.

Occasionally passers-by would break their journey and run their eyes appraisingly over our equipment. Why were a group of foreigners collecting and drying local plants which were neither good to eat, smell, smoke or sell? Had we discovered something of value? Cobagón was far from any authority and we were very much aware of our vulnerability should anyone wish to pillage our belongings. As none of us were sufficiently fluent in Spanish to convincingly explain what we were doing, we crossed the linguistic barrier by adopting one of Colombia's cultural successes. A pot of coffee was always kept at the back of the fire pit ready to offer anyone a *tinto*. The results of that simple gesture were magical. Looks of distrust were replaced by friendly smiles

and, even if what we were doing remained incomprehensible, a communion had been established that sent visitors peacefully on their way.

We completed our collection of plants in the environs of Cobagón just as changes in the weather foretold the imminent arrival of the rainy season. Sunny days gave way to drizzle and we knew that to ensure the professional preservation of the accumulated specimens we would have to return to Bogotá without delay and place them in the special drying ovens available in the National University. We had amassed some four thousand herbarium specimens comprising over one thousand four hundred "numbers" which contained about one thousand two hundred species. The collection was divided equally into three parts. One was sent to the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington DC, the second was donated to the National University in Bogotá and the third went to Cambridge with the other expedition members.

For them, their time in Colombia had been an enjoyable and interesting hiatus between graduation and a career. With guaranteed employment waiting in England they were happy to return to familiar surroundings and establish their niches in the security of a society they understood.

I was still undecided about my future but I knew that whatever I chose would have to have freedom, beauty, and a sense of adventure. Colombia's diversity offered the opportunities of an "un-travelled world." Endowed with one thousand six hundred species of birds, two thousand species of orchids, an abundance of mineral wealth, three mountain ranges rising above both Caribbean and Pacific coast lines, climatic zones and vegetation varying from the alpine to the tropical and an uncongested heterogeneous population virtually devoid of ethnic discrimination, the country might be a good place to settle. I could afford to look around for a few months and if I found nothing of interest in which to immerse myself I would move on. John Corner's smile and advice about opportunities were still fresh in my mind.