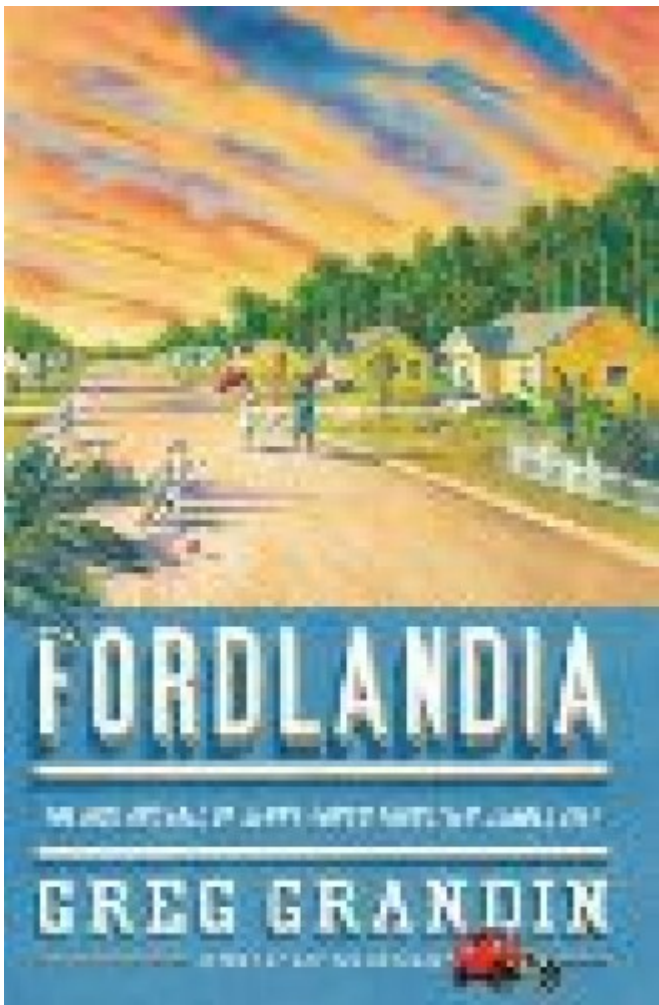


Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City

reviewed by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [February 9, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City

Greg Grandin
Metropolitan

Henry Ford never did things by halves. When he built a factory, it was a temple of industry, such as the mammoth plant at River Rouge. When he wanted a stable workforce, he paid five dollars a day, a sum that in 1914 seemed to his fellow capitalists irresponsibly generous. He employed company spies to check up on his workers, making sure that they abstained from liquor and practiced good hygiene. He announced the end of dairy products (“The cow must go,” he said) and even the end of history. The next step for his outsized ambitions was establishing his own utopia.

In 1927, to protect his rubber supply from being held up by a cartel, Ford purchased a tract of land in the Amazon the size of Tennessee. He intended to form his own rubber plantation. But that was just an occasion to pursue a more sweeping dream: he would export middle-American life to the rain forest. He would build shingled Cape Cod homes with electric appliances and install paved sidewalks. There would be poetry readings and other edifying discourses, travelogues about Yellowstone Park, square dances and a golf course. In Fordlandia the automaker aimed to turn the jungles of Brazil into something more like Michigan.

The carmakers who have lately been begging for federal assistance bear little resemblance to last century’s entrepreneur, who held more sway than a president and inspired almost religious devotion. Various associates called Ford the “Jesus Christ of industry,” a “New World Moses.” (Aldous Huxley satirized such fawning in his dystopian fable *Brave New World*, where the cross is replaced by the T, as in the Model T, and people piously invoke “Our Ford.”)

Greg Grandin helps us to appreciate what people saw in Ford—how socially progressive, even revolutionary, he seemed in comparison to other captains of industry. He hired a diverse workforce and said women should have the right to vote. As World War I broke out, he chartered a peace ship to carry a “people’s delegation” that would lobby for armistice. “I don’t believe in boundaries,” he told John Reed, the American communist. “I think nations are silly and flags are silly too.”

But he was a man of contradictions. The business owner who paid humanizing wages also built the dehumanizing assembly line and forever speeded it up. He declared, “History is bunk,” then gathered thousands of items from an idealized American past to establish a museum at Greenfield Village. He refused to be hoodwinked by creeds, then bought into the crudest anti-Semitism.

In the case of Fordlandia, Ford's contradictions proved both comic and tragic. The project was riddled with graft from the beginning. Workers found it easier to burn the land than to clear it and sent up terrifying conflagrations with clouds of ash that turned the day bloodred. Then they planted rubber trees in dense groves that attracted blight. The result was an ecological disaster.

Much to the frustration of efficiency experts, the slow drip of sap, so different from an assembly line, could not be hurried. And Fordlandia's isolation made for other problems never seen in the States: workers had nowhere to spend their money—they were 18 hours from the nearest settlement—so after pocketing a few weeks' pay, they usually wandered off. That left a small crew at the mercy of corrupt overseers. A series of executives sent by Ford to iron out these difficulties lost either their nerve or their scruples.

Fordlandia's disintegration inevitably brings to mind another tale of tropical madness, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In the first two years of the project, 92 people died, most of them from malnutrition. Snakebites took dozens of lives, as did malaria and yellow fever. The wife of one executive described "black ants with claws just like lobsters." A maid lost her arm to a caiman while swimming in the river. Her employer, the highest Ford official in residence, "may have been honest," Grandin admits, "but honesty is not a required jungle virtue." The official would bury four of his own children there. One man went insane and committed suicide by jumping into a river full of crocodiles. Babies were carried off by jaguars.

Less spectacular dangers did plenty of harm as well. Bordellos spread venereal disease; men engaged in knife fights; a change in the food rations led to riots. Then, when only a skeleton crew remained, the jungle vegetation overtook Fordlandia, quietly laying waste to the carefully plotted streets and trim bungalows. Millions of rubber plants withered and died.

Early on in this venture, a Brazilian official spoke of "the faith everyone has in Ford." Settlers entreated Ford to come see the project for himself and put everything right. "The magic of that name has penetrated into the hearts of the most humble; it has got into mine. They have faith in Ford, so have I. Thousands await his coming; he will come." He never did.

It's not hard to see Fordlandia as a pointed example of American imperialism—not a lovely idea gone horribly wrong, but an idea that was horribly wrong from the start.

Grandin writes with considerable restraint and allows his material to make its own argument. While conducting his research, he spoke with the handful of early Fordlandia settlers who still reside there. He notes, “There is in fact an uncanny resemblance between Fordlandia’s rusting water tower, broken-glassed sawmill, and empty power plant and the husks of the same structures in Iron Mountain, a depressed industrial city in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula that also used to be a Ford town.”

Grandin doesn’t belabor that point, but it’s the saddest one of all. Today much of Michigan, long overreliant on the auto industry, has fallen on hard times. You can drive through town after town and see the wreckage—shuttered factories, abandoned schools, whole sections of towns deserted and gone to seed. It’s a jungle.