

# Java Script

Rimbaud's undocumented missing fortnight in Central Java forms the central core of Jamie James's recently published book.

**T**HOSE of us growing nostalgic for the follies of our youth, who set off on our worldly travels not knowing where our pig was headed cannot state that our sole reason for travelling was an innate curiosity.

It may have been to explore one's roots, as London witnessed with its influx of Australians, and Ireland with its pilgrimages of Americans. For others, our travels may have been motivated by a desire to start over in midlife, as for Jamie James, the author of *Rimbaud in Java*, or, as perhaps for Rimbaud, an escape from the restrictions of family life.

Several factors determine where we go and where we end up: it may have been a postcard from abroad, a meeting with someone from afar, or a travelogue on television. For some, vicarious imaginings through reading, say, Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* or even Tolkien's *The Hobbit* may spark wanderlust.

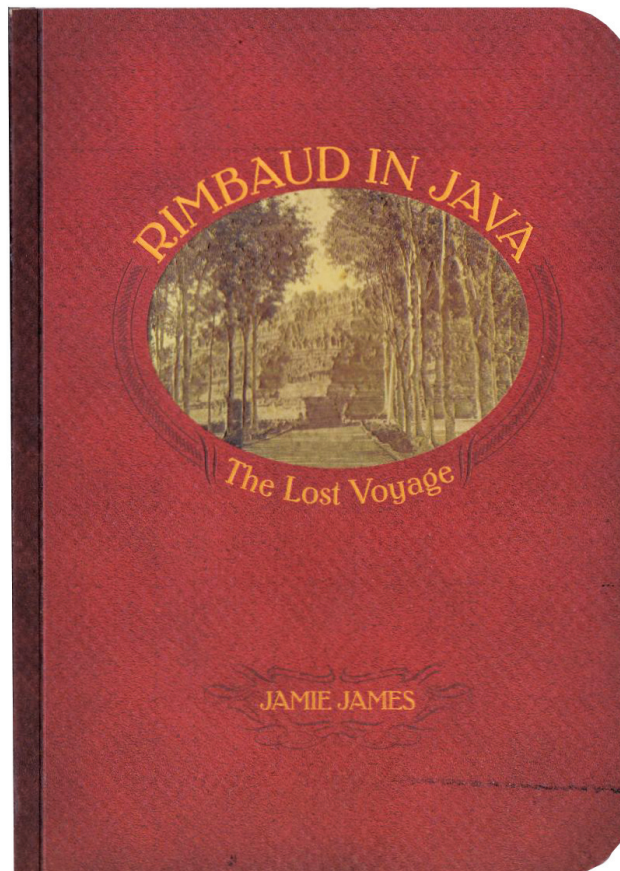
For Jean-Nicolas-Arthur Rimbaud, who was born in 1854 in the provincial town of Charleville in the Ardennes, northeastern France, it was surely a combination of factors.

He was the second son of a career soldier who left the family six years later, shortly after the birth of a daughter. Arthur's mother was strictly religious and controlling, even to the extent of collecting the two boys from school until they were 15 and 16. Her exertions may have been her way of distancing her boys from her two alcoholic 'bohemian' brothers.

Rimbaud was a gifted student in most subjects at school. Two teachers, one a private tutor, encouraged his love of literature and he began to write poems in French and Latin, one of which was published at the age of 14.

When his teacher left the school upon the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, as is the wont of insulated adolescent boys, Rimbaud rebelled and ran away to Paris, was arrested for travelling without a ticket, which cost him a week in jail, returned to Charleville and promptly ran away again fearing the wrath of his mother.

For the next four years, Rimbaud had a dissolute lifestyle. He sent sever-



al poems to Paul Verlaine who in 1894 was elected France's 'Prince of Poets' by his peers. Verlaine invited Rimbaud to join him and they embarked on a year-long torrid affair, living in poverty, drinking absinthe, smoking hashish and thereby shocking society in Paris, London and Paris. All the while, Rimbaud was producing what came to be known as Symbolist writing, the representation of absolute truths which could only be described indirectly.

Yet, this reviewer wonders whether Rimbaud had a very specific notion to journey to the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia.

#### fr. A Season In Hell (1873)

*My day is done. I'm leaving Europe.*

*The sea air will burn my lungs; hot climes will burn my skin.*

#### fr. The Illuminations (1874)

*I have seen sidereal archipelagos and islands whose delirious heavens are open to the voyager.*

By 1875, Rimbaud had given up poetry, whether because he had 'grown up' or because he wanted to become financially self-sufficient in order to resume

his poetic life at some later date is unknown.

In May 1876 he enlisted in the Dutch Colonial Army, a mercenary force, set sail for Java on June 10, and arrived in Batavia on July 22. The force of 172 men were barracked in what is now Jatinegara, and on July 30 set sail again for Semarang, caught a train to Tuntang, from where it was an 8-kilometer march to the encampment at Salatiga.

By August 15, Rimbaud had deserted and no documents have been found about his life until, it is thought, he arrived at his sister's house in Charleville on December 31. To reach there on that date, examination of shipping records suggests that he was aboard the *Wandering Chief*, a Scottish barque which set sail from Semarang on August 30.

It is Rimbaud's undocumented missing fortnight in Central Java which forms the central core of Jamie James's recently published book. Of necessity, what he writes is pure conjecture laced with descriptions of present-day relics, the sights and sites which Rimbaud may have

seen and encountered, as well as descriptions from writers of that period such as Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Alfred Wallace, of opium dens, Sumatran jungles, the many ruined temples and so forth.

As a critic, James brings a profound knowledge and 'a consuming enthusiasm' for the life and works of Rimbaud. I am in some awe of what James has achieved with this slim volume, a book I shall continue to dip into, so as to explore and journey down some of the many paths.

If you are already an 'enthusiast' for Rimbaud, then you will delight in this addition to your library. Moreover, it is a rare book, impeccably printed on quality 'art' paper with period illustrations and one that is a real pleasure to hold and possess.

Terry Collins

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