

Richard Schultes

IN AN account by Richard Schultes of his experiences among the Indians of southern Mexico he described a mushroom, previously unknown outside the region, used to create hallucinations. The account was mainly academic in style; nevertheless it excited a writer who went to the region and sampled the mushroom. His report was published in *Life* magazine in 1957 under the title "Seeking the Magic Mushrooms". Thus the "magic mushroom" came to the United States, to be promoted among others by Timothy Leary, one of the high priests of American drug culture of the 1960s, and still remembered for his recipe for supine living, "Turn on, tune in, drop out".

Although Mr Schultes never expected his botanical discoveries to affect, however indirectly, American social behaviour, he did not criticise Leary and his weird followers for their use of drugs. He merely expressed his disappointment that Leary had not spelt correctly the Latin names of plants from which their drugs were derived.

But Mr Schultes was sad that the public attention given to their hallucinogenic effects distracted from the value of plants as a source of medicines. After his adventure in Mexico he spent many years among tribespeople along the Amazon river. He collected thousands of previously unrecorded plants and reckoned that some 2,000 had medical value. Many more, he believed, were waiting in the jungle to benefit humanity. He liked to talk about curare. For many years it had been known as a powerful, but short-term, poison on darts and arrows used by Amazonian natives. Mr Schultes traced the plants that curare came from. They yielded a substance now used as a muscle relaxant in surgery.

He inevitably became concerned that the Amazonian jungle and its inhabitants were disappearing alarmingly quickly. Around 100 tribes have become extinct in Brazil alone in the past few decades. As the tribespeople disappear, so does their knowledge. Mr Schultes saw it as his job "to salvage some of the native medicobotanical lore" before it was lost. Perhaps, he said, the cure for cancer "may come from the witch-doctor's knowledge of plants".

His orchid

Richard Schultes's parents were immigrants from Germany. His father was a plumber in Boston. Young Richard won a scholarship to Harvard, the first member of his family to go to university. In 1941 "as a young botanist, armed with a bright, new doctor's degree", as Mr Schultes described himself, he was sent by Harvard on



Richard Evans Schultes, jungle botanist, died on April 10th, aged 86

a trip to the Amazon to study medicinal, narcotic and poisonous plants. On his first day in the jungle he found a previously unrecorded orchid. He sent it back to Harvard where it was called *Pachyphllum schultesii*, the first of many plants attached to his name. He was due to return after a few months but stayed in Amazonia for 14 years. During the second world war he was told to remain in the jungle to look for sources of natural rubber for the United States to replace Asian plantations lost to the Japanese.

Mr Schultes sought to travel simply. His kit is a reproach to overloaded backpackers. He carried a single change of clothing, and little food: he ate the same as his native hosts. He did have a canoe, but it was light enough to carry unaided, and anyway the natives were usually happy to lend a hand. Heavy boots, he found, were usually unnecessary because jungle snakes generally struck at the neck. A pith helmet, though, he found indispensable in the rainforest. This made Mr Schultes resemble an explorer of the Victorian era, which in some ways he was. One of his heroes was Richard Spruce, a 19th-century British naturalist who also explored the Amazon region.

Like the Victorians, Mr Schultes had an unquenchable curiosity that went beyond his speciality. He wrote about the use of hallucinogens in tribespeople's religious ceremonies. Shamans, medical men, under the influence of hallucinogens believed that they acquired supernatural powers enabling them to cure illness, locate lost articles, affect fertility and control the weather. Mr Schultes saw a connection with stories of European witches who used potions that enabled them to fly. "Flying" was an experience claimed by some of Leary's followers. Mr Schultes's Christianity seems to have remained untouched, but he accepted that to Indians throughout the Americas some plants are sacred. One of his books is called "Where the Gods Reign".

Back from the Amazon with extraordinary tales to tell, Richard Schultes remained at Harvard as a teacher until he retired in his 70s. Students remember his prowess with a blowpipe that he kept in his laboratory. Each year he returned to the Amazon to collect more plants. He received numerous honours. A chunk of Amazonia preserved by the Colombian government is called Sector Schultes. He edited a journal called *Economic Botany*, covering a science of which he was a pioneer. Mr Schultes remained a modest man. A reporter, awed by his reputation as the world's top authority on ethnobotany, asked how he should be described. "Just a jungle botanist," said Richard Schultes.