

REVEALING THE EL DORADO: 500 YEARS OF MINING IN BRAZIL

1Machado, I.F. and 1Figueirôa, S.F. de M. 1Instituto de Geociências da UNICAMP, Campinas, Brazil

Myths and legends about fabulous riches were quite common when the first Portuguese settlers arrived to Brazil in the beginnings of the 16th. century. They attracted even more interest when the navigator Francisco Orellana announced the discovery of El Dorado in 1540, somewhere in the Amazon basin. Other rumors pointed to the Colombian highlands, where Spanish conquistadors were looking for El Hombre Dorado, or simply El Dorado. Later, in 1595, Sir Walter Raleigh set sail to find El Dorado, but his search in Guyana was unsuccessful. In the Brazilian history, this myth, too, supported searches that led to failure and success. One acknowledges that gold and diamonds generated an astonishing wealth to the Portuguese crown during the 18th. century and part of the next. As the alluvial deposits were being depleted, better techniques had to be employed to assure profitability, but a number of failures apparently eroded the motivation of Brazilian and foreign entrepreneurs to invest in mining during the Empire. In 1835 or so, the gold cycle was gradually replaced by the coffee cycle in Southeast, and by the rubber cycle in the Northern region, and eventually by the modern industrialized economy that this nation shows nowadays (GNP approaching US\$ 1 trillion), the strongest for developing countries in the Western hemisphere. To a certain extent, there was a continuous process of reverse alchemy, turning gold into an array of manufactured goods and other raw materials that build up the core of today's Brazilian economy.