



'Naturalist in' Series
HEAD FOR THE HILLS
A Review by Christopher K. Starr



Scenic view of Dominica's forest

Review of:

Frederick A. Ober 1880. *Camps in the Caribbees*. Boston: Lee & Shepard 360 pp. (Available online at the Biodiversity Heritage Library.)

[46th in a series on "naturalist-in" books; see www.ckstarr.net/reviews_of_naturalist.htm]

Frederick Ober regarded the Lesser Antilles, or Caribbees, as the "loveliest islands in the western hemisphere". He went there in 1876 on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution and stayed almost two years. His main mission was to collect bird specimens for the museum. Some naturalist-in books, in the manner of ordinary travelogues, spend the first part of the book on a long approach to the destination. In contrast, Ober very sensibly tells us

that, since there was nothing special about his sea voyages there and back, he will spare the reader their narration. Plainly, he has his eye on what really matters.

He was also someone who thought about what he saw. In the very opening of the book we are told that "Along the entire group of the Caribbee Isles, sweeping their western shores, flows a strange, mysterious current." This sounds like the start of a poetic discourse on the magic of tropical winds, but it was nothing of the sort. Rather, he was referring to the long misunderstood outflow from the Orinoco, which varies seasonally according to the great river's volume.

There was evidently some uncertainty whether some of the (edible) mammals found in the West Indies were native or brought there by the Amerindians. The sparseness of information available at the time, relative to our own time, is seen in the opening statement of Chapter 16 that "There are monkeys in Grenada" without further comment on how they got there. They are the mona monkey, *Cercopithecus mona*, also introduced into St Kitts & Nevis from West Africa. (Note that this is not the green monkey, *Chlorocebus sabaeus*, also introduced from Africa into several of the West Indies).

A strong sense of enchantment pervades in Ober's clear, strong prose, that is often lyrical but never purple. He remarked that "It is one of the pleasures of existence here than I can at any time [even from his campsite up in the hills] have within my view the still, creamy, beautiful sea of the Antilles." It is perhaps the most loving tribute to the smaller islands that I have met from any naturalist, even Al Akong.

There are 19 chapters with 34 illustrations, plus an appendix listing the previously known birds of the Lesser Antilles and another on the 19 new species described from Ober's specimens. The first 10 chapters are about Dominica, with later chapters treating Guadeloupe, Martinique, St Vincent, the Grenadines and Grenada.

The question is posed of whether the Lesser Antilles had once had an above-sea connection with South America (continental islands) or were raised volcanically from the sea floor (oceanic islands). Ober was inclined to regard them as oceanic, with no previous dry-land connection, but withheld judgement. In fact, the proof that they are oceanic is better seen in the pattern of their biota than in their geological history.

The book's title is appropriate. Already at that time there was a continuous belt of cleared, populated coastal lowlands on each island, while the interior was mostly forested and little penetrated by tourists and scientists. Accordingly, Ober soon headed up to the hills, including Guadeloupe's Soufrière (1467 m, the highest peak in the Lesser Antilles), Dominica's Morne Diablotin (1447 m) and Boiling Lake (800 m), St Vincent's Soufrière (1234 m) and Grenada's Grand Etang (550 m). There

were few or no houses where he was going. Ober paid attention to daily changes in his sites, including the sounds of dusk and dawn. He took special note of bird calls associated with these changes.

In these pages we find affectionate remarks on habitats and their vegetation -- streams, waterfalls, pools, tree-ferns, palms, epiphytes and lianas -- and the living birds that he was there to shoot. He had a special affection for hummingbirds, of which there is just one species in eastern North America, his institutional base. Chapter 8 concerns his efforts to collect the Dominica-endemic imperial parrot or sisserou, *Amazona imperialis*. It required a regular hunting expedition, as it does not flock, seldom comes down to the lowlands, and is well camouflaged and shy.

In a later chapter he went up Dominica's Morne Diablotin in hopes of settling the mystery of the diablotin bird, which had not been reported as seen in 30 years. It was described by Labat (1722), but did it really exist? The testimony of local people was contradictory. The older people blamed the lack of recent sightings on egg predation by the



Mysterious bird from St Vincent's Soufriere

opossum. In the end, Ober's party did not find any, and he doubted its existence.

That doesn't seem quite right. First of all, Labat's report was not hearsay. His hunting party, he said, bagged and then had for supper 15 or 16 diabolins. So, what is or was the diablotin? The bird known by that name today (and presumably at that time) is the black-capped petrel, *Pterodroma hastata*. Labat's several pages of description of the diablotin and its habits match this bird well. (His illustration on page 349, which looks more like a large crow, was presumably done by someone else.) The black-capped petrel, long since extinct in Dominica, is endangered in the few islands where it persists.

Chapter 12 describes a camp in the crater of St Vincent's Soufrière volcano, which had had a great eruption in 1812. The aim was to ascend the mountain and collect specimens of the famous "invisible" bird, the St Vincent solitaire, which had been heard but not reported seen for a century. Like many before him, Ober had heard but not seen the bird during an earlier ascent, and when he was finally able to see one he concluded that its song was ventriloquial, hence the difficulty in spotting it. With much difficulty, he was able to collect specimens. Initially described as a new species, it is now treated as a form of the rufous-throated solitaire, *Mydastes genibarbis*.



Army Crabs

Changing the subject, he remarks that "It was during this march that we met one of the most curious processions ever seen in this land of wonders." It was a great mass of crabs descending the hillside toward the sea. The crabs were

Gecarcinus ruricola, the most thoroughly terrestrial of all west-indian crabs, found virtually throughout the Antilles. They can live many kilometres from the sea as adults.

Among the various common names is "army crab", on account of the phenomenon Ober witnessed. In April-May, after mating, the females go down to the shore in a mass migration to lay their eggs in the sea, where the larvae develop.

Some wandering naturalists have a knack for going native, but Ober wasn't one of them. Although he got local help in collecting birds and so had plenty of contact with working-class people of the islands, Ober remained very much an outsider. He was about equally annoyed at the creolized English and French Creole that the people spoke. Why couldn't they speak standard English, like regular Americans? Uh, well, because they weren't regular Americans, and standard English wasn't their language.

Chapter 14, about a month spent on a sugar estate in Dominica, is like a mini version of W.H. Hudson's *Idle Days in Patagonia*. Ober was bed-ridden with an illness, so that after a few days "I had exhausted all the resources of the room; had watched my favorite lizard as he caught flies on the window-pane, and a great, naked-limbed spider [presumably *Heteropoda venatoria*], that every morning caught a cockroach and dragged it to my headboard."

Unable to go into the field, he gives us a disquisition on his (white) host's complaint about his workforce. The local black people, satisfied with the breadfruit and fish available for free, found little reason to undertake farm labour for a wage. "Of the many trees which were introduced into the West Indies, none have proved so great a boon to the laboring classes and bane to the planters as the bread-fruit." Indentured labourers imported from India were so well protected by the British government that their bosses were unable to abuse them to force them to work. The terms of indentureship specified six days of work per week, but they persisted in taking Saturday as a holiday and so only put in five days.

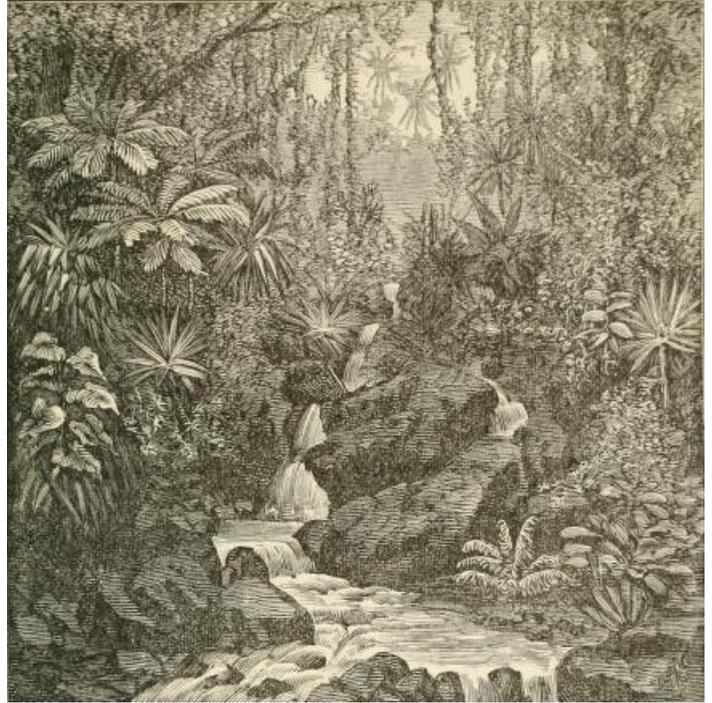
In a later chapter he noted that cacao was especially abundant on Grenada, with the pernicious (to sugar planters) result that people could earn some income without working for wages.

This is all set forth with a straight face, and the reader waits in vain for the punch line. "Oh my, the poor, suffering ex-slave-holder. The Africans are not facing starvation and so have conceived a puzzling distaste for farm labour, while the mischievous authorities prevent him from importuning the Indians to make them work for him. It is all just too much to bear!" Ober doesn't address the rather obvious (to us) question of why the planter didn't simply work the fields, himself, but his occasional references to "the better classes" implies a reason.

With repeated references to Columbus's remarks on the same places during his second voyage, Ober devotes more attention to colonial history than most of us would want, as it is a distraction from the natural history. Worst of all, Chapter 18 is mostly taken up with Josephine de Beauarnais's antecedents, birth and early years on Martinique. Maybe, as a stalwart of the "better classes", she really deserved so much ink, but to me the chapter is a dead loss. To return to people worthier of his attention, Ober was eager to meet the Caribs of Dominica, of which he had heard many admirable things. He visited a Carib reservation at Salibia and was based there for several weeks. Chapters 6-7 are about the Caribs' customs, crafts and economy, even as he regretted that they had been much acculturated. "Here, then, are people who have lost language, prestige, tradition, ambition, and it is a matter of comparatively little time ere they will have ceased to exist, and the forests and rivers, the cool, fern-shaded baths and tropic streams, no longer know their presence." His strong sympathy for the Caribs and their history of (losing) struggles for survival and independence somewhat compensate for the nonsense about Josephine and those poor ex-slaveholders.

Finally, there is comment on a group of low, arid islands with almost no real forest to speak of. "The natives of the Grenadines display a love for their islands not easily understood by a resident of more fertile and more attractive lands. I can understand this, but can hardly explain it. There is a feeling born of the isolation, of the very

barrenness of the land, of the loneliness of an island, that attracts one to it."



I am with Ober on this. I have had happy times in the Grenadines, which I hold in great affection and look forward to visiting again, but I couldn't quite tell you why. Maybe it requires a longer stay there.

Reference

Labat, J.B. 1722. *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de l'Amérique*. Vol. 2. Paris: D.B. Delespine 598 pp. 