WHERE THE SNOW IS AT HOME

Review of:
[First in a series of "naturalist-in" books.]

My late father always maintained that "You can't tell a book by its cover." Now, Francis Starr was a dear old soul, a righteous man and a serious reader of serious books, but he wasn't always right, and certainly not this time. You can tell a book by its cover. I do it all the time. In fact, you can often tell a book just by its title. On my shelves are books with such titles as Animal Architecture and Building Behaviour, Celtic Fairy Tales, The Colossus of Maroussi, The Crippled Tree, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, The Satanic Verses, Souvenirs Entomologiques, Spiders in Ecological Webs and Working for Wages. Even without knowing the authors, those titles immediately announce volumes worthy of one's closest attention.

And so I have long since learned that any book with the title A Naturalist in ... is a sure-fire good read. My purpose here is to initiate a series of reviews of books in this vein, personal memoirs of being a naturalist in various parts of the world. Not all follow this title pattern or even have "Naturalist" in the title, but any of them could. As far as I know, there is no standard name for this peculiar, distinctive genre of nature writing, which I will call "naturalist-in" books.

Let me warn you from the outset that I will not be reviewing the core naturalist-in classics, such as White's The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne (first published in 1789), Darwin's The Voyage of the Beagle (1839), Bates's The Naturalist on the River Amazons (1863), Wallace's The Malay Archipelago (1869), or our local classic, Worth's A Naturalist in Trinidad (1967). If you have not already read all of those, you are either very new to natural history or, more likely, just a jiveass naturalist.

The Himalaya is an unforgiving place for those who don't know what they're doing, and its naturalist-in literature is not the work of dilettantes. Such luminaries as Joseph Dalton Hooker (1854), Frank Kingdon Ward (1913) and Richard W.G. Hingston (1920) are among those who have contributed books of note on the region. The book under review here is a worthy addition to this tradition.

Lawrence W. Swan (1922-1999) spent his early years in Darjeeling, northeastern India. The full, broad view of the Himalaya that he had from his home and school set his focus for life. His has been a very eventful life, and this is a very eventful book.

The first chapters introduce the setting and realities of Himalayan exploration and treat the question of the yeti, or abominable snowman. In an especially memorable passage, Swan records in clinical detail his reaction upon encountering a set of fresh "yeti" tracks in the snow: "My hair was rising. It started down near the sacrum, surged past the lumbar vertebrae and crept up to the thoracic, where it stayed and prickled and thrilled. I am sure my eyes were wide open where the upper lid lifted itself above the top edge of the iris as I scrutinized the rocks and snow below and scanned the nearby slopes."

The Himalaya is no place for loners, and coöperation is a constant factor in the
narrative. The human elements looms large in these pages, and that means mostly climbers and Sherpas, each of whom Swan treats as a distinct breed apart from ordinary humanity. It is noteworthy that, despite his long, close association with these two groups, Swan continued to stand outside of each, understanding its viewpoints but never quite sharing them. At least, he usually understood. Relating how his Sherpas led him on an extraordinary shortcut that turned out to be an extremely difficult, dangerous and baffling route, he was brought to comment that "I wonder why such an exquisitely exposed route should exist at all, and to this day I cannot guess at the real function of this 'path'. My best thought at the time of our passage was that it had something to do with suicide."

Swan's central scientific interest was biogeography, both ecology (he was the original describer of the aeolian biome) and historical. Where a chapter is devoted to a particular group (e.g. leeches, frogs, pheasants), it is mainly as a way of discussing some particular biogeographic problem. Still, one does learn a great deal about Himalayan animals from this book.

One thing that makes this book such a good read is Swan's sense of literary pacing and punch. Let me give one example. He gives an extensive narrative of the butchering and cooking of a sheep by his Sherpas. They are a thrifty people, who are reluctant to waste any part of the carcass. There is a description of the fate of various parts, from their removal and cooking to the consumption of those that will not keep for later days. Swan gives special attention to the parts that bob up in his portion of the night's curry, including some stray bits of lunch and "a section of bronchus, complete with hyaline cartilage rings in sequence". He found the latter chewy, not especially flavourful, but not too bad. (Not being Dave Hardy, he does not crack wise that it "tastes like chicken".)

And there he drops the matter of the innards, so it appears. Some pages later, he is relating an especially difficult climb up a sheer rock face in order to escape a cul-de-sac. He crawls up bit by bit, laboriously, using every advantage that his toes and fingertips can afford until, right at the top, he manages to grab a bamboo stem and haul himself onto the ledge above. "As I pulled and the bamboo came closer to my face, I could see what I was holding. I looked at this saving thing and I had to pause and laugh while my feet hung over the cliff. That precious handful of bamboo was ringed and sized and very like the bronchus of a sheep." Hemingway would have gotten a charge out of that passage.

The book ends with a very moving chapter about the arrival of the monsoon in the southern foothills of the Himalaya. It has the distinct emotional tone of an old man looking back upon marvelous times, like W.H. Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago*. After describing the monsoon and what difference it makes in the biota, Swan goes on to describe how he would like some day to be at just the right place and time to witness its onset.

"I should like to find a bungalow, a site near the lower forests of the Himalaya, where the vista is to the south and across the plains, and where the monsoon can be seen coming in all its glorious fury. It could be near Tindaria below Darjeeling."
References


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