TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Review of:
[Twentieth in a series on “naturalist-in” books.]

Over a period of 11 years from 1899, Ernest Wilson made four expeditions into the mountainous borderlands of the Yangzi River basin in western China and Tibet. This was a time when vast areas of western China were unknown to western science. The Yangzi -- known in China as the Zhong Jiang, or Long River -- is the third largest river in the world, flowing more than 6000 km, mainly from west to east, mostly through mountainous areas.

Botanically, it is an extremely rich region, and Wilson’s professional purpose was to collect novel plants for introduction into European and North-American gardens. In all, he collected about 5000 species, including the seeds of more than 1500 species. The central environmental feature in that wild region is topography, and the theme of plant geography runs through this book. He also had much to say about the native non-han peoples, with whom he showed great affinity.

The book is a sober, straight-forward narrative, very even in style and format. Wilson does not stop at intervals to change direction and address a particular topic, like stopping a road trip at a scenic overlook. In this respect, A Naturalist in Western China differs markedly from most naturalist-in books.

The early chapters give the geographic setting and the various means of rough travel by land and river. In later chapters, much is said about plants seen and collected. However, there is very little explicit mention of collecting. This is a blessing, as the enumeration of species and specimens would be quite tedious.

Given the heavy baggage demands, the long caravan trips with many assistants were complex, demanding affairs, quite unlike what most of us would consider a field trip. Hardships of the route are mentioned, but without dwelling on them. Furthermore, Wilson was present during the Boxer Rebellion and several other anti-foreign uprisings, so it was a risky place to travel in both the physical and human aspects.

Even under such difficult conditions, Wilson evidently took copious notes as he traveled. His account of places and events has a real loving touch, without the speculation and vagueness characteristic of typical travel literature, for example, “Looking back on the route we had traversed, we saw that the narrow valley is flanked by steep ranges, the highest peaks clad with snow, but in the main, though bare and savage-looking, they scarcely attain to the snow-line. On all sides the scenery is wild, rugged, and severely alpine.”

Another example, with finer focus: “By an undulating path we reached the top of the ridge, which is known as T’an-shu-ya (Lime Tree Pass) from a gigantic
Linden that occurs there. This tree (Tilia henryana) is about 80 feet tall and 27 feet in girth, and though hollow appears to be in good health. The young leaves are silvery, and the tree, from its size, is a conspicuous object for miles around.”

Sometimes Wilson went for weeks without meeting another foreigner or hearing English spoken, and in some villages he was the first foreigner the locals had ever seen, so that he was quickly surrounded by a crowd of the curious. (I know what this is like. It can be distinctly annoying, and the best solution is to adapt and treat it with amusement.)

One does not expect the author of such an account to take a dewy-eyed view of all Chinese as rarified philosophers. While Wilson manifests a deep love and admiration for the people, he is realistic, with occasional flashes of contempt for individuals and institutions. Still, his human sympathy is such that it even extends to the aims of the Boxer Rebellion. The narration of this adventurous episode reads something like a field-trip report by Dan Jaggernauth.

There is extensive ethnographic comment on some of the non-han minorities, but for the most part people and their economy are treated in passing, although in an odd way. There is something about this book that resembles a traditional Chinese painting: a detailed landscape, in which anything that is rendered large is usually a flower or bird, the human element always present, but tucked away in the distance in a minor role. Sometimes the titles of his photos even fit this pattern, e.g. “Sandstone Bridge with Cypress and Bamboos”.

The 59 photos, mostly full-page landscapes, are a valuable addition to the text. Many photos of particular trees effectively serve as specimens. There is also a large fold-out map of Sichuan and western Hubei, showing the main part of Wilson’s route, although it is misplaced in volume 2. (Vol. 2, published in 1914, is a general treatise on the flora of the region, with chapters on various aspects of rural economy.)