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I LOOKED OVER JORDAN, AND WHAT DID I SEE?

Review of:

Victor Howells 1957. *A Naturalist in Palestine*. New York: Philosophical Library 180 pp.

[Twenty-first in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

In the opening line of the preface, Victor Howells states that "This book is about a country that no longer exists." Historically, Palestine is the region between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Soon after Howells was there, it was split into two, Israel and Jordan, much like the partition of India in the same period. And what is known as "Palestine" today is a ragged series of bantustans engulfed by Israel.

The region still exists, to be sure, although much altered, especially by agriculture, and it has become a hazardous place for field work.

Howells went there with a young German naturalist in order to conduct a biotic survey of land and freshwater animals. He came from South Africa, traveling by camel from Suez for four days across desert. It was a rigorous way to get there. He can be quite about the landscapes. The book includes a description of a sunset so poetic and uncorny that it moved even me, who rarely have any use for sunsets real or imagined.

However, Howells's main lyricism is devoted to his many magical encounters with animals, as when he was riding through a moonlit night. The air was alive with moths, which were soon in turn hunted by great numbers of bats. Then, suddenly, the bats were gone, and a hush fell over the scene. A huge bird came rushing by, an eagle owl, "with outspread wings blotting out the moon." It swooped to catch a small rat, and just like that it was gone.

Let me quote another example directly, so you can judge for yourselves:

"Then I heard a noise so unreal and so near as to leave me rooted to the spot -- a shuddering throaty laugh. A laugh mingled with a sharp dry cough that came from a black shape that was gliding slowly towards me. A chill of uncontrollable fear slithered slowly through me, as two balls of green fire appeared out of the moving shape. As the thing came closer, the green balls appeared to set in a ragged squat head." It was a striped hyena.

Palestine is a land of climatic extremes, dry and wet, hot and cold. It forms part of the Palearctic Region, so that its biotic affinities are mainly with Europe, Eurasia north of the Himalaya and North Africa. Given its position, it is also something of a crossroads, with significant Afrotropical and oriental elements. Although it is not an especially biodiverse region, Howells found plenty of animals to engage his attention. Chameleons, jerboas, gazelles, vipers, bee-eaters, the Arabian babbler (probably the most sociable bird in the world), Old World harvester ants, eagles, hoopoes, pariah dogs, cichlid fishes, Old World vultures, and of course dromedary camels. There are repeated encounters with dangerous vipers, pariah dogs and hyenas.

As in David Attenborough's movies, there is a fine sense of predation as a fact of life for wild creatures. There are some rather gripping accounts of particular predation events, and therein lies a key problem. They are too dramatic, too much like adventure

literature. The whole book is suspiciously action-packed -- after all, how much wild adventure will one encounter in a nine-month field survey in a relatively tame part of the world? -- and there is a great deal of striving for effect. This, together with occasional carelessness about scientific names and some other facts, is the book's main shortcoming.

Howells does not have a great deal to say about the people, but there is a pervading sense of a long, complex human history. He lived and worked among Arabs and came to be known to many of them, even some that he had never met. On a first encounter, one asked him "Are you not Jald Kalif, the strange man from the south who collects the wild things of the ground, the friend of A in el Bis?" Howells knew that he and his activities had become the talk of the Bedouins for a long way around.

Although he was fond of the Bedouins and friendly with Arabs as a whole, he does not hide his revulsion at some individuals and their habits. He expresses sympathy for the condition of women under Islam, for example remarking on hearing the mournful song of a young woman "hidden from all eyes by the darkness of her life-long prison in her husband's home." There are no rants on this or any other social topic, but the author notes both his pleasures and displeasures.

The photos are evidently not by the author or his party and so do not contribute directly to the narrative.

Toward the end of the book, Howells remarks that one day, when Palestine has returned to normal and peace is once again upon the land, we will return. As far as I know, he never did.

A Naturalist in Palestine is a very readable account by one who clearly loved the region and its people and knew its animal life well. However, in view of its sensational tendency you might want to switch on your bullshit filter before cracking it open.

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