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ON A FEW OF THE SEVEN SEAS

Review of:

Alfred Alcock 1902. *A Naturalist in Indian Seas*. London: John Murray 328 pp.

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

Naturalist-in books are a peculiar type with fuzzy boundaries at the interface between four dimensions: place (including the native people), biota, personal experience, and events (often adventures). Any account that focuses so strongly on one of these as to relegate the others to a supporting role places itself outside the naturalist-in genre. This probably explains in large part why naturalist-in books are almost entirely the product of English speakers, as such a balancing act grows out of a particular tradition.

This is illustrated by two books in other languages. The title of Paulian's (1949) book plainly suggests that it is naturalist-in, yet it is about the biota only. And Guenther's (1931) book is similarly one-dimensional (not, in itself, a criticism). The original title, *Das Antlitz Brasiliens*, simply means *The Face of Brazil*, and the English title was evidently adapted to fit the naturalist-in niche market. Alcock's book, contrast, sits nicely in the middle of what is naturalist-in.

The expression "the seven seas" is baffling to many. We are taught in school to recognize just four oceans, and you probably know at least a dozen bodies of water called seas, so what are these seven seas? The term has been used in several senses, but the most usual refers to regions of the Indian Ocean, each with its own distinctive character. This was where real seafaring first began, in a complex, changeable ocean whose trickiness revolves around the monsoons. Here, survival depends upon a superior knowledge of space, time and weather. The Mediterranean, by comparison, is a placid puddle.

All of this is implicit in *A Naturalist in Indian Seas*. Alfred Alcock (1859-1933) spent four years on board the British survey ship *Investigator* in the Indian Ocean. His book deals with three of the traditional seven seas: the Andaman Sea, Bay of Bengal and part of the Arabian Sea. It was composed during two monsoons, while the ship was in harbour and he was engaged in analysing specimens.

The Marine Survey of India was established in 1874, and its early findings opened a new world to the public imagination. The *Investigator*, launched in 1881, continued earlier studies in the coastal zone. Part of this was in fringing reefs and atolls, but many sites were less alluring. Alcock says of one particular part of India that it is "not to be commended for its scenery, which consists chiefly of slimy creeks and screw-pine swamps alternating with long stretches of drifting sand washed by a muddy sea."

At the same time, the *Investigator* initiated the first serious focus on the depths of the Indian Ocean. This is the core of the book, occupying about one-third of the chapters. The ocean depths are a zone of constant darkness, cold and great pressure. In strong contrast to the surface zone, it is very stable, with little water movement or temperature change. In Alcock's time, before the era of deep diving, our scant knowledge of abyssal creatures was based on dredging the sea floor (benthos). This is a laborious business, and he spent a great deal of time sorting and processing specimens. Because the grab is made virtually blind, many samples are mainly just mud. Even so,

the time spent at sea was very productive, as Alcock had little to do except collect and process samples according to a fixed routine. This gave rise to a wealth of newly-described species. They were surpassingly strange and plainly came from an alien world, but by the time they reached the surface they were already dead or dying. Until the age of deep diving some decades later, we knew nothing of how they lived.

Aside from his main work, Alcock made many direct observations of living animals at the surface and in coastal areas from the deck of the ship and during many short visits on shore. He presents these in a number of engaging vignettes of particular animals. He showed much less interest in plant life. I very much regret that there is only passing mention of my beloved mudskipper fishes (*Periophthalmus* spp.), which I think he must have encountered often.

Although he did not say so directly, Alcock interpreted his observations according to the theory of evolution by natural selection. This is worth noting, as he wrote at time when natural selection was still controversial, not nearly the accepted mechanism that it is today. Coupled with this, he showed an interest in large biological questions, such as warning colouration in animals, the mating patterns of birds, and bioluminescence in benthic animals.

Another attractive feature is his attention to particular open questions. As an example, there is a small, shallow lake on Little Coco Island. It is only slightly brackish and appears to have formed when a mangrove swamp became cut off from the sea. Because it is the only body of fresh water on the islet, and because it is evidently quite young, it furnishes "a perfectly clear sheet on which to record the manner of colonisation of a freshwater territory newly won from the sea." That's good thinking.

The author's attitude toward the local people -- after all, he was an Englishman -- was distinctly colonialist. He regarded them much as one would peculiar and occasionally wayward children, benignly but in no way to be considered as equals. This is not to say that he took no notice of the locals. On the contrary, Alcock showed much interest in their customs and economy. Still, he rarely mentions any Indian by name, while many of the Englishmen in the book have names. If one reads enough of the old naturalist-in books, one gets used to this sort of thing.

References

- Konrad Guenther 1931. *A Naturalist in Brazil*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin 399 pp.
Renaud Paulian 1949. *Un Naturaliste en Côte d'Ivoire*. 3rd ed. Paris: Stock, Delamain & Boutelleau 216 pp.

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