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SWEET ARE THE USES OF ADVERSITY

Review of: Gilbert C. Klingel 1940. *Inagua*. New York: Dodd, Mead 385 pp.
[Twenty-sixth in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

In 1930 two optimistic young men sailed from Chesapeake Bay to the Bahamas. Gilbert Klingel (1908-1983) had little sailing experience, while Wallace Coleman had none. Their only landfall came in the form of shipwreck. Struggling exhausted onto land near dusk, they didn't know where they were or even if the island was inhabited.

And it was there that Klingel showed himself a true believer. "From high above, from far up in the firmament came a faint crying -- plaintive mournful notes like those the wild geese sing in the north wind. We looked up and froze in our tracks. From the interior of the island was coming a great flock of scarlet flamingos, wings ablaze in the setting sun. ... Nearer and nearer they came, drying the while, reached the land's edge, circled and returned to the dark interior. And at that same moment the sun dipped beneath the horizon, taking the light away and plunging the land and sea into darkness." Klingel indulges in occasional purple prose, but his descriptions of biota and places can be finely lyrical. *Inagua* was "a place indefinably sad, a peculiar, pathetic, wistful place where human endeavor seemed to come to naught but emptiness and desolation."

In the morning they walked -- on the way finding a new, endemic lizard, *Sphaerodactylus inaguae* -- until they met people and learned that they were on Great Inagua. As most rich kids would do, Coleman bolted for home at the first opportunity. Klingel stayed, and *Inagua* is his account of that initial period and a return visit. He had earlier told a class of students that "no well-planned expedition is subject to adventures", yet this was one long adventure.

The original plan had been to sail from island to island, making biological collections for the American Museum of Natural History. Now the boat was lost, and Klingel was confined to a single island. He took over a small, abandoned house of coral blocks and thatch, using one of the two rooms for sleeping and the other as a laboratory. Having salvaged what he could from the wreck, he set to work as a naturalist. He collected more than 1700 reptile specimens (but no amphibians), which formed the main material for Noble & Klingel's (1932) monograph. Klingel, who went on to a distinguished career in biology, is best known for his 1951 book about Chesapeake Bay.

Among his salvages was a large supply of canned food. However, the labels had all washed off, and without refrigeration he had to eat whatever he opened for the day. One day he dined on "salmon, syruped cherries and canned pumpkin". Klingel felt the solitude, but there was much to do, and the activity lifted his spirits. He made a mass of casual amateur observations alongside his main researches. A key study was into the habits of the minute *S. inaguae*, the subject of his first ever important discovery.

Besides attention to the land fauna, Klingel spent countless hours watching shore and intertidal animals. It helped that he had his personal bathtub, a little tidepool more than a meter deep. It also had various fishes and other animals, so that he could conduct leisurely observations while he soaked. And it served as a blind from which to watch shore animals.

Great Inagua, at 1544 km² the third-largest of the Bahamas, is at the southeast end of the archipelago. It is mostly flat (maximum elevation 33 m), with sandy soil and a low, sparse vegetation. Almost a quarter of its surface is occupied by the very shallow, brackish Lake Windsor with its extensive mud flats. These are just the conditions for flamingo nesting, and one of Klingel's main objectives was to find the expected breeding colony of the caribbean flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) that he had seen on his first day. Approaching a flock of roughly 1000 birds, he got within 50 meters, when they all took flight at once. It was a thrilling sight, and Klingel stood for minutes in mute astonishment.

This magnificent red-pink bird nests in coastal areas and salty lakes around the Wider Caribbean. A female lays just one egg in a season, and the young may take six years to reach maturity. Any species with such long generation time and low reproductive rate will have great difficulty recovering from a population downturn. The flamingo was once heavily hunted for its feathers and a century ago was close to extinction. Today it is strictly protected and doing well. During the March-July breeding season, Lake Windsor attracts some tens of thousands of individuals, and smaller numbers are present at other times.

The roseate spoonbill, *Platalea ajaja*, was then in much the same situation, and Klingel feared that it could soon be extinct, yet this is another conservation success story. The spoonbill now breeds over a substantial range and has an IUCN status of "least concern". On a visit to Lake Windsor you will see at least a couple of roseate spoonbills.

The account of Klingel's first encounter with this rather spectacular bird is quite gripping. He was far from civilization on a four-day walking circuit of the island, tired, almost out of food and water, his shoes falling apart, a hazardous situation that called for maximum prudence. Even so, seeing a flock of spoonbills fly up a long, mangrove-lined inlet to forage, he couldn't resist following, even as he knew this was asking for trouble.

The mangrove was alive with various birds, and Klingel was drawn ever further in as the spoonbills kept just ahead of him. With night approaching, hordes of mosquitos alit to feast on him, and he "cursed the spoonbills, cursed my own stupidity, cursed the predicament in which I found myself." However, even in his desperation he remained open to new delights. "A soft light stealing across the water distracted me momentarily; it was the moon creeping blood red above the trees; through the stinging hordes before my swelled eyes I could see the coppery hue lighting the edges of the leaves." Reciting a poem to distract himself from the mosquitoes, he finally stumbled out past midnight.

Klingel had an eye for large questions and thought about the landforms seen on his rambles. Another major theme was the interconnectedness of nature, a sense of the web of life before it was widely current. He recognized oceanic islands with their simple biotic communities as an especially good place to study

this web. Klingel took a keen interest in the colonization of oceanic islands and islets by new species. On offshore Sheep Cay, the lizard fauna comprised a single arboreal *Anolis* species, and he discusses how it may have got there. On another occasion he shot 16 sandpipers and examined them for any live organisms they might be carrying, finding several seeds and protozoans.

Klingel is almost lyrical on the topic of smells in nature and the importance of this sense. Noting an interesting tree odour, he went to the trouble of following it to its source by crawling along the ground, where the air was less disturbed. His naturalist spirit is evident in yet another way. Humans are creatures of the sunlight, but many others are not. Far from ignoring nocturnal animals, he spent much time out at night. That is when great swarms of beach hoppers dig their way up through the sand and hermit crabs emerge in masses, along with bats and nighthawks. Some nights he slept outside on the sand.

He also gave a much attention to the sea, with several chapters on marine life, especially in a barrier reef. There everything seemed very light and delicate in a world of deception, camouflage and confusing colours. He admired sharks, and noted that octopuses, at that time generally "considered horrible and exceedingly repulsive", were smart, agile, precision predators, like birds of prey. This attitude came long before sophisticated nature movies made it commonplace.

Erickson (1987) tells the story of Great Inagua's sole industry, salt, since its foundation in 1849. It collapsed when the price of salt fell sharply after World War I, and once prosperous Inagua fell into poverty. This was the state in which Klingel found it, and he predicted that without a revival of the industry the island would be depopulated. Having been in places where the economic base had fallen on hard times, I readily recognized his description of a society with no distinct leadership and little social vigour.

New management resumed production and introduced other businesses in 1936. Major difficulties and a new downturn came in the 1940s and 1950s, until the Morton Salt Company acquired the industry and much of the island in 1955. That continues to be the situation today. The salt works -- an impressive operation, with broad evaporation ponds, gleaming mountains of white crystals and conveyor belts carrying immense quantities to ships -- still dominate the local economy. As long as production remains a paying proposition, Inagua will be peopled.

References

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