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SO NEAR, YET SO FAR

Review of:

Thomas Barbour 1945. *A Naturalist in Cuba*. Boston: Little, Brown 317 pp.
[Thirty-second in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

The American biologist Thomas Barbour (1884-1946) was something of a nerdy in his youth, with an orientation toward natural-history museums and their specimens. He later served as director of Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology for almost 20 years.

Barbour had broad interests in animals, especially amphibians and reptiles, and travelled widely on field studies. He was especially fond of Central America and the Caribbean and explored Cuba during about 30 visits. He was mainly engaged in collecting specimens, but with a naturalist's keen interest in the living organisms. The joy in his many returns is seen in his loving descriptions of the various approaches to the island, especially to the port of Santiago. He characterized himself as "not only a Cuban by adoption but a devoted friend of the land and its people." And in his autobiography (Barbour 1943) he remarked that "If I grow loquacious and prolix when it comes to talking about Cuba I do not care a rap, for I love the country with a deep, passionate affection." For a biologist from Massachusetts, the largest of the West Indies was conveniently close at hand, yet a very different world.

His main base in Cuba was the Soledad Botanical Garden, near Cienfuegos. This garden, founded in 1901 and continuing today, was a Harvard facility at that time. It made perhaps the greatest contribution in allowing young north-american biologists of the time to acquaint themselves with a tropical biota.

Barbour's broad interests are on display in this book. There is much attention to caves, and perhaps the most engaged chapter is on collecting in caves with emphasis on fishes and crustaceans.

The chapter on extant mammals focuses on the Zapata Swamp on the south coast of Cuba. The dwarf hutia, *Capromys nana*, was known only from fossils until it was discovered in the swamp. Of special interest is the endemic large shrew *Solenodon cubanus* -- a second species is endemic to Hispaniola -- that retains some markedly primitive features.

A chapter on bats includes extensive treatment of the horse bat, *Molossus tropicorhynchus* (Gray). At one time he collected a great number of live specimens for dissection, put them in bags in his hotel bathtub and went to dinner. One bag was insecurely tied, and the bats got loose and flew about the dining hall, to the consternation of many. Barbour discreetly tied the bag, finished his dinner and then addressed the huge task of dissecting. Then there was the matter of disposing of the bodies. Early the next day he put them all into a cheap suitcase, took a train out of the city -- before he reached his

destination, "the bats had become aromatic" -- and then rowed out to sea and discarded the suitcase. This sort of true-life anecdote is an essential element in a naturalist-in book.

Barbour's interests extended to the physical environment. The book includes an appendix reviewing the physical geography and geological history of Cuba, with remarks on fossils. There is also much about hurricanes, although in terms of force and immediate destruction, not their roles in shaping island biotas.

He regretted that he never got to explore caves in the company of Felipe Poey (1799-1891), regarded as the founding father of Cuban biology (Poey 1851-1858, 1865-1868). He also would have loved to go into the field with German-born Johann Christoph "Juan" Gundlach (1810-1896). Gundlach first went to Cuba in 1839 and lived there continuously from 1845 to 1865, returning from time to time after that. He sent many papers to European and American journals (Ramsden 1915). Gundlach was a very modest man, much loved by the local people and characterized by Barbour as "one of the noblest men the world has known." I have heard Cuban biologists who missed meeting him by more than a century refer to him with similar appreciation.

However, Barbour was a personal friend and admirer of Carlos de la Torre, "one of the most captivating characters with whom I have ever come in contact." De la Torre (1858-1950) was a formidable field naturalist who specialized on land snails.

Barbour was a sociable man, remarking that "I love to chin and chaffer with all the country folk. I came in contact with them for the sake of finding out not only what they knew about the habits and distribution of the birds in which we were interested, but also what they could tell me of their children and their children's children, as well as all the local gossip." Accordingly, he gives much attention to such aspects as home life and manners, religion, public entertainment, cursing, education and especially food and drink (with recommendations; Barbour was quite a trencherman). The 16 pages of black-and-white photos show more buildings and street scenes than plants and animals.

Today, accounts of tropical field work by biologists from the industrialized north make a point of an egalitarian outlook -- mostly sincere, I have no doubt -- toward the other peoples and societies. This was not always the case, and Barbour's contemporary readers likely saw no contradiction his deep affection for Cuba and its people, on the one hand, and a solidly paternalistic attitude on the other. He refers to Cuba as "independent", which of course it was not in any real sense until 1959. It is treated in the book as a colony of the USA, including in scientific terms. He mentions, for example, that Cuban biologists utilized the Soledad Garden for research on the same basis as their American colleagues as if this were something noteworthy, as it probably was. His work in Cuba and Central America was much facilitated by United Fruit Company officials, and his reference to the company's "civilizing influence" might well flabbergast modern readers.

Barbour had the makings of an ideal naturalist-in author: a professional-level biologist of long experience, who retained the amateur's enthusiastic eye and conveyed original observations with strong, lyrical expression. However, while A

Naturalist in Cuba is a worthwhile read, I regret that it is not the splendid book it could have been. It was written close to the end of Barbour's life, and the waning of his powers is apparent. The key shortcoming is one of focus. The text is rather superficial, often skipping from species to species, with no in-depth treatment of the life and habitat of particular species. The genus *Anolis* is especially juicy in Cuba, and Barbour gives it considerable attention, yet even this is treated in a rather airy, distracted manner. The chapter on "Reptiles and Amphibians" is mainly a breezy survey of what is there, with occasional notes on personal encounters. His frequent asides regarding the Boston home area and other places away from Cuba are a distraction.

Barbour often gives the local and english vernacular names of species, but is rather casual about scientific names. For example, he devotes a page to the habits of a certain spider wasp without even mentioning its genus, *Pepsis*.

References

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