



‘Naturalist In’ Series
IN A BEAUTIFUL, WOUNDED LAND
 By Christopher K. Starr



Review of: Raymond B. Cowles 1959. *Zulu Journal*. Berkeley: Univ. California Press 267 pp. 44th in a series on ‘naturalist-in’ books; see www.ckstarr.net.

Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) province is on the southeastern edge of South Africa between about 27°S and 31°S. Between the coastal lowlands and the magnificent Drakensberg and Lebomba mountains, lies an extensive high plateau of rolling hills. This area is the inspiration of the most famous book to come out of South Africa, Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. One cannot resist quoting the novel's opening. “*There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it.*”

The plateau is at the edge of the subtropics, far enough south that it can be quite cold in the winter. There are also large climatic differences over relatively short distances, and biotic differences to go with them. Toward the plateau's southeastern limits lies the Hluhluwe Umfolozi Park, the nucleus locality of *Zulu Journal*. The book is as much about landscape and the author's enchantment with it, as it is about wildlife. It is also of course about race relations and social (in)justice.

Raymond B. Cowles (1896-1975) was born in Natal of American missionary parents. In his youth he lived on missions in native reserves, where Zulus were the main ethnic group. He grew up speaking their language fluently and was very much interested in their natural-history lore, language and customs. He has many comments on these people from a natural-history point of view and delights in giving the Zulu names of vertebrates and many plants. More than almost any other naturalist-in writer, Cowles made a point of treating the native people as a natural part of their environment.

In his boyhood he was sometimes privileged to join in hunting expeditions with these men whom he regarded as heroic. “*Frequently during the proceedings some man started a deep, humming song. In the chorus all the big, stalwart Zulus joined with*

enthusiasm ... There is no race that sings more naturally than the Zulu.” He also shows an ear for the vocalizations of other species, for example “*The mellowed sound of the hyenas [is] one of the truly beautiful calls of the wild, although it occasionally lapses into hideous, high-pitched squeals and gurglings.*”

As puberty approached his parents sent him to the USA. This was evidently done to preserve his virtue, as “*There is no Zulu word for virginity.*”

Cowles was on staff at the University of California for many years. In his youth he gained a key insight into the “*big and blundering Nile monitor lizard*”, *Varanus niloticus*, found throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa. The female lizard excavates hole in a termite (*Macrotermes* spp.) mound when the rain has softened the nest walls and lays her eggs inside. The termites seal the breach, and the mound protects and incubates the eggs (Cowles 1930). *V. niloticus* apparently does not have this habit in northern Africa, although I have occasionally seen it in a member of the *V. salvator* group in South Asia.

From this early start, he went on to do pioneering research on the temperature relations of desert reptiles (Turner 1984), which helped to establish the reptile physiology as a distinct scientific field. Aside from his professional research papers, he wrote a naturalist-in book on the deserts of



Adult Nile monitor lizard: very widespread in sub-Saharan Africa and north along the Nile

California (Cowles 1977),

Zulu Journal, dedicated to Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), is based on boyhood memories and on field notes from two visits back to South Africa in the 1920s and another in the 1950s. It is a book that endeavours "to capture the mood of the country, the seasons, and the passing years."

Arriving in 1953, he took a train ride into the interior. Looking out the window, some of what he saw was familiar, but there were also changes. Large wildlife was notably scarcer and mostly in poor condition. He reflected that coming generations might have very little opportunity outside of zoos to experience the kind of wildlife encounters that had been commonplace in his childhood. The landscape was still beautiful, but no longer filled with the creatures that had once made it so magical.

On the other hand, the absence of such top predators as lions and leopards had allowed some animals - such as baboons - to become much commoner. Overpopulation beyond the environment's carrying capacity appeared to contribute to the animals' poor physical state. There was also the problem of a huge growth in the human population, leading to further environmental degradation.

Like any well-rounded naturalist, Cowles displays a keen interest in questions outside his professional research. Among these are a) concealing colouration, which he believed was a major function of the Africans' dark skin colour, b) the causes and origin of flocking in birds, with attention to various weaverbirds, especially in winter, and c) the place of humans in the balance of nature.

A naturalist-in book set in southern Africa cannot very well lack adventure. Among other things, Cowles writes of encounters with rhinoceroses, huge unpredictable beasts that make it advantageous to be able to locate and climb a tree quickly. He describes tense moments when stalking rhinos and Cape buffalos, trying to get close enough for photography without alarming the animal into charging, while keeping an eye open for climbable trees.

"Eventually one of the three [black rhinoceroses]

trotted toward us. [My guide] suggested a more or less leisurely retreat into a convenient tree. I accepted his suggestion with alacrity, especially as the animal continued to advance and came so close that only its forequarters showed in the camera view finder." Rhinos have very poor eyesight, but their senses of smell and hearing are acute.

And then there were the little tick birds, which sit on the rhinos to pick off and eat blood-engorged ticks. These have good eyesight, and when alarmed by a large animal, such as a person, they move over to the far side or end of the host. Accordingly, a rhino can point itself in the intruder's direction simply by shifting about until the tick birds are congregated on its rump. The presence of dangerous large animals raises the question of carrying a rifle. Can one do field trips on foot in such habitat without being armed? As Cowles shows, there is no obvious answer. "At first a man strolling through big-game country with only a camera and no rifle at hand feels extraordinarily naked and helpless. It is not surprising that one's resolve not to carry a gun will suffer a fate like that of the monthly resolution to quit smoking."

There are also engaging comments on many smaller vertebrates, e.g. aardvark, mongooses, cane rats and fruit bats. All of these notes illustrate that Africa remained - and to some extent still remains -- a rich hunting ground for original discoveries in natural history.

And there are of course the tiny animals. The seemingly insignificant fungus-gardening termites form huge mound nests that are a conspicuous part of the landscape in much of Africa. Cowles gives a good description of colony's preparation for mating flight and subsequent mating. With the first warm rains of the spring, untold thousands of winged queens and kings emerge from the mounds. These edible creatures are so abundant that they form a windfall for many predators: toads, bats, birds, mice, lizards, even human beings. People catch them in quantity in pans and fry them in their own fat, eating much of their catch on the spot.

One naturally assumes that people living in intimate relations with the creatures around them know them well. This is well founded, for the most part, but naturalists have occasionally remarked on

striking counter-examples. Cowles found some native beliefs about even relatively common animals rather preposterous. For example, the perfectly harmless file snake, *Simocephalus capensis*, was among the most feared among the Zulus. It was believed that even to touch a dead file snake was invariably fatal. Cowles's attempt to dispel this idea by handling one simply proved that white people were immune to its effects.

Throughout the period of the book, and especially at the time of his last visit, apartheid was the central social fact in South Africa. The country had a very small number of rich and a large mass of very poor people, with the division almost entirely along racial lines. In the segregated train, first class was reserved for whites, the second and third classes for blacks. Even so, he was struck by the "irrepressible pleasure of life" among even the poorest natives and a decrease in public happiness as he went from third to first class. The master race's

position and wealth had come at a heavy cost. Or, as Cowles puts it, "Seemingly, as a man acquired position that was held only precariously by a narrow range of comportment and money, spontaneous happiness expressed outwardly and shared with others diminished."

He remarked that "Above all, it is difficult to explain the existing relations between white and black." Really? Cowles did not live to see the end of apartheid. He would likely have been amazed at how quickly and relatively painlessly it came, although its abolition has done relatively little toward resolving the economic divide.

References

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Mound nest of *Macrotermes natalensis*. This one is a little taller than an average adult person.