

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kevin Winker, ed. *Moments of Discovery: Natural History Narratives from Mexico and Central America*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. xiii + 401 pp. \$75.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8130-3417-1.

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This is a collection of twenty essays, primarily by U.S. and European biologists, including the editor. Kevin Winker commissioned the authors, mostly ornithologists, to reminisce about their adventures in the field, from the 1940s to the 1980s, and then compiled the results in no discernible order and with very little editing. The book is intended as an homage, perhaps even a paean, to the “wonderment and history” of biological field research in Mexico and Central America (p. xi). In the afterword, Winker writes, “I have always enjoyed a good story,” and his impetus in creating the collection was nothing more or less than helping pass on such good stories to others, in hopes of strengthening field research traditions that the sharing of intimate accounts fosters (p. 374). Though his intent is well-meaning and heartfelt, unfortunately few of the chapters are as compelling as they could have been if the lack of narrative-writing prowess among the biologists had been mitigated by a heavy editorial hand. Annoying typographical and other slight errors plague the volume (e.g., “Caribbean”), indicating sloppy copy-editing. A few of the accounts begin and end abruptly and are quite brief, seeming to have little justification for inclusion. Readers will likely find themselves skipping around in search of the best content; to that end, I would recommend Paul S. Martin’s “Green Mansions of Tamaulipas,” chapter 13, as a good starting point.

To a certain extent, the book succeeds, in that valuable insights into the day-to-day and nitty-gritty of field research in the biological sciences can be gleaned from

the generally dry and unimaginative narratives that predominate. The book will be most appealing to those readers who can empathize with the “story-swapping” and even gossipy approach of several authors as an authentic way to capture the raw experience of the field. Others may perceive little more than a series of disjointed, strung-together anecdotes on lists of places visited and birds seen and/or collected. But for the discerning reader, there is a strong degree of intertextuality in evidence: well-known and even “legendary” figures such as George Miksch Sutton and Alexander Skutch are encountered in living color and are paid homage to as teachers, mentors, and intellects, while authors also seem to encounter each other not infrequently, and occasionally present varying accounts of the same collecting trips. The most detailed and insightful stories cover Mexico and focus particularly on the Sierra de los Tuxtlas in Veracruz and the Rancho del Cielo (now part of El Cielo Biosphere Reserve) in the Sierra Madre Oriental of Tamaulipas; there is quite sparse coverage of Central America.

Latin Americanists may find this volume helpful for reasons the editor did not intend. Most of the chapters offer invaluable insights into the mind-sets of tropical biologists, and are thus useful for those interested in critiquing the ways and means by which Western scientific discourse and praxis have penetrated Latin America. The workings of the culture of field ornithology are laid bare, and motivations, expectations, and encounters with the Other are typically in evidence; in that sense, the col-

lection is a gold mine for the critic. Not unexpectedly, there is little of more than anecdotal value for the social scientist in terms of insights on Middle American societies, but at least most contributors—Walter Thurber’s rather frightening diatribe aside (see note)—present balanced, if unsophisticated, portraits of local culture in the areas they visit.[1] Common to most contributors (Paul S. Martin being the most obvious exception: “‘Pristine wilderness’ is in the eye of the beholder,” p. 235), however, in what will prove irksome to some readers, is the betrayal of a rather naïve and simplistic understanding of land use dynamics over time and particularly the long-term effects of human influence on forest cover. In the rush to blame the mayor and the hungry families down the road from the research station, the general tendency is to ignore—whether willfully or blissfully can be difficult to determine—the political and economic structures driving environmental change above and beyond the most obvious and heartbreakingly visible local scale. To give the impassioned writers the benefit of the doubt (“having done away with everything, people fight among themselves for the last crumbs”: Miguel Alvarez del Toro, p. 18), the sources of their own livelihoods and the near-mystical inspirations for so much that they considered worthwhile in the world were disappearing before their eyes, and the nearest and most obvious culprits were the tree-chopping and field-burning *campesinos* in search of new *ejidos*. But, after all, this is not a book by or for social scientists, who would, I suspect, if given a similar task, have tended to gloss over the importance of ecology and biodiversity, using nature solely as a backdrop for their reminiscences of the human societies they were researching.

Much in evidence in this collection are the intricate details of intellectual lineages in biology. Historians of science will no doubt find useful anecdotes that in several cases, I suspect, have never been divulged elsewhere in print. However, the failure to recruit more women authors (only Lula Coffey and Joyce Heck are included, and neither had careers as biologists) as well as more authors from the regions of study is distressing. The one exception to the latter is the first chapter, “In Search of the Horned Guan,” by M. Alvarez del Toro, a rather dry and ultimately quite depressing account of El Triunfo in Chiapas by one of Mexico’s leading natural scientists and conservationists, who died before the publication of the book. While inclusion of the great man’s final writing is a bit of a coup for this volume, it does not make up for the lack of accounts by other Latin Americans. Because several of the accounts are from as late as the 1980s and

the editor himself states that “today a scientist exploring a country’s biological diversity is as likely to be a national as a foreigner. The professional role of women, too, has blossomed” (p. xii), it seems as if a greater effort could have been made to provide more balance. Though it could be argued that top-rate field biologists have been predominantly male and from the United States and Europe, it is not the case, as already noted, that all the authors are biologists. For example, the intriguing chapter 14, “A Kekchi Odyssey,” is by Don Owen-Lewis, a one-time Maya Indian liaison officer and farmer in Belize, where he hosted scientific expeditions.

Better editing of content and style, and inclusion of perhaps ten of the essays in some logically discernible order, would have greatly improved this collection. No attempt was made in the volume to provide a history of field biology in the region, and this will likely leave the uninitiated rather perplexed, if not disoriented. In sum, this is a book for the in-crowd, with limited value for non-biologists, and certainly not a must-have—except, I suppose, for aspiring field biologists within the tradition.

#### Note

[1]. With my apologies to any who knew him, I feel it is necessary to point out the disservice that Walter Thurber’s chapter 18, “Fifteen Years of Studying Birds in El Salvador, 1966-1980,” does to the other authors and the volume as a whole. After reading this chapter (better yet, avoid it!), one may consider the possibility that the “human side” of field biology might sometimes be better left untold—but if told, then examined critically or at least contextualized by the editor. The late Thurber’s straightforward, factual account of his work in El Salvador as a U.S. State Department employee hired to promote science in that country degenerates, in the “Flight from Paradise” section (pp. 322-326), into an anticommunist diatribe. These wretched beings are characterized as “vile, pitiless, deceitful, evil, inhumane, treacherous, thieving, assassins, cheaters, liars, murderers, merciless, vicious, vermin, thugs” (p. 322). Thurber self-identifies with the Salvadoran elite of the early 1980s, who were faultless, according to him, while “U.S. policy was reprehensible, and the American news media made no effort to obtain unbiased news” (p. 322). Thurber ultimately fled the country ahead of the “Communist scum” (p. 322) and their “Communist reign of terror” (p. 322). Now, without delving into the murky questions of who murdered whom at that time in a country engaged in a genocidal struggle by a U.S.-armed oligarchy against a well-organized guerrilla resistance, it is clear that Thurber was

at very least willfully blind to the atrocities carried out by other than “the Communists.” The Cold War mentality he betrays, however, casts an ugly pall over this book, in that one begins to imagine that a clear lack of political sensibility or knowledge of social historical issues may not be, after all, a minor flaw among field biologists.

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