Review of:


[Fourth in a series of "naturalist-in" books.]

Brent Wilson grew up in the unglamorous, polluted Yorkshire town of Huddersfield, a milieu from which he very much wanted to escape. In 1989, with a degree in geology, he looked for far-away possibilities and found that the best available was as a teacher with the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), the British counterpart of the American Peace Corps and the Canadian CUSO. Expecting to be sent to Africa, he was surprised to find himself posted as a high-school teacher to Nevis, a sharp departure from the "Badde Olde Days" in England.

This is the account of his six years on Nevis. It is a story of almost unremitting culture shock, of joys and disappointments, told with grand humour. There are plenty of colourful characters and hilarious events, rather like in Gerald Durrell's books about his childhood in Greece. It even includes a girlfriend who drove the author to drink. Literally. Some of the people mentioned in the book are provided with pseudonyms, for reasons that are not always plain to me. Among these is the beekeeper Roger, known as Honeyman. In fact, this is my dear friend Quentin Henderson, known familiarly on Nevis as Beeman.

The book opens with a scene of British expatriates in Nevis, sitting on a porch at nightfall, drinking and reminiscing about how grand England is. Coming from Huddersfield, it is an England that Wilson does not recognize. (Let me mention here that the very concept of an expatriate strikes me as alternately absurd and pathetic, and I personally take care never to be mistaken for such a misfit. Just so you know.) At the same time, during a visit to England after two years he felt out of place in his old environment. And he knew that he had gone native on Nevis when he found himself asking new arrivals the same sorts of things the locals would ask. Even so, he remained in large part an outsider and, as such, was in a good position to observe how Nevisians see themselves within the federation of St Kitts & Nevis and in the larger scheme of things. I find his remarks on this topic especially valuable.

Nevis is a lovely place with an extremely thin economic base, a major part of which is remittances from emigrants. This factor unavoidably affects the Nevisians' view of their place in the world. Feral donkeys and vervet monkeys -- the latter also introduced into St Kitts, Montserrat and Barbados -- are all over the island and have become major agricultural pests.

In addition, there is a fine sense of history and much attention to historical artefacts, something that is generally lacking in the West Indies. The most West-Indian feature of the whole story, I find, is Wilson's frequent visits to the overgrown grave of Phillippa Prentissa Phillips (1650-1669), discovered by accident on one of his excursions.

One of the great shocks in his six years was Hurricane Hugo, who hit Nevis with full force very soon after Wilson's arrival. This occurred after the start of the school term, but before classes had started, if you see what I mean. Hugo knocked out the electricity and water supply for some months, so that it took three weeks for the schools to re-open. Even then, classes were only in the morning for a while. Wilson took this as an opportunity to put his specialist education to work by making the first detailed geological
map of the Saddle Hill Eruptive Centre, a 6km$^2$ volcanic mount at the south end of the island.

Returning from one especially demanding field excursion, he remarks, he "looked ... like a scarecrow who had been dragged backward through an acacia hedge by a herd of donkeys whipped on by wild monkeys." The characterization of his looks is relevant, because the thing that Wilson most regretted about life on Nevis was his celibate condition. There are numerous references to his attempts to change his status, which finally came to a gloriously successful result.

This is not a naturalist-in book of the usual type, as it is only in small part about natural history. Most of this is about the geological survey of Saddle Hill and studies of foraminifera. Foraminifera are protozoans of the group Sarcomastigophora, comprising about 4000 living species ranging in length from about 1/10 to about 20mm. You can think of them as amoebae with hard shells. They are found in all marine environments, where they may be planktonic or benthic.

It is their shells that set foraminiferans apart from other protozoans. These have a species-characteristic form and are extremely durable, so that one can identify species long after the cellular matter is gone. Together with their diversity and great abundance, these have given foraminiferans a rich fossil record from the Cambrian period to the present, with their greatest diversity in the Cretaceous period from 146 to 65 million years ago. Such a fossil record is good for more than just reconstructing past species assemblages. Foraminiferan shells are rather like pollen grains. They form durable layers that can provide the key evidence of climate in the distant past, among other things. That is, by relating the conditions in which particular living foraminifera are found, one can make inferences about conditions under which their extinct close relatives lived at particular times and places.

Brent Wilson is now a lecturer in the Faculty of Engineering at UWI, where he continues to makes sense of foraminifera. Living on an Arc is in the UWI bookstore and possibly some others in Trinidad, also available from Amazon and Barnes & Noble or through http://www.lulu.com/content/172820.

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