DEEP DOWN IN THE JUNGLE

Review of William Beebe’s Guyana books:


[Thirteenth in a series on “naturalist-in” books.]

C. William Beebe (1877-1962), at one time the most famous American naturalist, is the subject of two full-length biographies (Gould 2004, Welker 1975). He is well known here as the founder of the Simla research station in the Arima Valley of Trinidad.

For about 60 years Beebe worked at the New York Zoological Society (NYZS), which not only managed the Bronx Zoo but had a substantial research programme. He was a strong believer that tropical biology was best pursued through varied, long-term studies at permanent, well-equipped stations. In 1916 the NYZS established a Tropical Research Station on the Mazuruni River of Guyana, between where the Cuyuni empties into the Mazuruni and where the Mazuruni joins the mighty Essequibo. This was, then, very much in a land of rivers. By this I mean real rivers, the kind that can float boats, with big islands in them, not the tinkling little brooks that witty Trinibagonians call rivers. Furthermore, it was only about 65 km from the sea, so that tides were an important factor.

The station was in time devalued by degradation of the surrounding area, but for a decade it was probably the single most productive site for tropical research. These three books are a selection of Beebe’s writings from this period. Most chapters first appeared as popular articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. With few exceptions, they are reports from the field, not reminiscences from back in New York. Together with the books of Bancroft (1769), Rodway (1894) and Hingston (1932) and a multi-author compilation of studies (Beebe 1917), they are part of a rich literature on Guyana’s natural history. A fourth book of similar title and thrust (Beebe 1949) is set at Rancho Grande in Venezuela, a successor to the Guyana station.

Beebe went to the tropics at a time when they had a reputation as dangerous, pestilential places. He vigorously refuted this nonsense and counterposed his own view of the rain forest as not only filled with wonders but relatively benign. The title of the first book, *Jungle Peace*, reflects this view. At the same time he took a thoroughly unsentimental view of predation and parasitism as key parts of the natural order. And a chapter in *Jungle Days* on “The Life of Death”, for example, treats the plants and animals found in the crown of a newly-fallen giant tree and the succession of organisms on it as it decays.

Beebe is not always careful with his identifications. In *Edge of the Jungle*, for example, we find a flabbergasting passage, some pages long, about a wayside weed being mauled by leaf-mining caterpillars, which in turn are attacked by a
parasitic wasp, with no attempt to identify any of them. This, I fear, is little better than travel literature. Still, he more than makes up for such lapses with his hard-core approach to nature -- when he wanted to know what it was like to be bitten by a vampire bat, he did what any real naturalist would do and slept with a foot exposed -- and original viewpoints. He does not take things for granted, as seen, for example, in his characterization of sleep as "one of the romances of existence, and not by any chance the simple necessity that it is reputed to be."

Each chapter has a well-defined theme. An especially striking feature is the way Beebe opens many chapters with an image that puzzles and grabs. The puzzlement has to do with the subject of the chapter, which Beebe is prepared to reveal to us, but not just yet. Beebe sets a leisurely pace and often takes a while to come to the point. To me, this is part of the charm, like a column by Wayne Brown that gives no forwarding address until he is good and ready.

"Butterflies doing strange things in very beautiful ways were on my mind when I sat down, but by the time my pen was uncapped my thoughts had shifted to rocks." [Okay. Now, is this going to be about butterflies, rocks or something else?

"A most admirable servant of mine once risked his life to reach a magnificent Bornean orchid, and tried to poison me an hour later when he thought I was going to take the plant away from him. This does not necessarily mean that we should look with suspicion upon all gardeners and lovers of flowers."

"There is a great gulf between pancakes and truffles: an eternal, fixed abyssmal cañon. It is like the chasm between beds and hammocks." [It is only three pages later that we learn that the chapter is about just that, hammocks, i.e. about the value of sleeping outdoors amid the nightly sounds and rhythms.]

A powerful sense of strangeness pervades these books. Let me illustrate this with three quotations:

"If an Indian had appeared down the trail, hopping endlessly and gripping the trunks, gazing upward with staring eyes, I should not have thought it more strange than the next thing that really happened."

"Like a rainbow before breakfast, a sloth is a surprise, an unexpected fellow breather of the air of our planet. No one could prophesy a sloth."

"Where a moment before was an unbroken translucent  surface, were now thirteen strange beings who had appeared from the depths, and were mumbling oxygen with trembling lips."

Ernest Hemingway must surely have learned some of his pacing and punch from William Beebe.

References


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