ON DESOLATION ROW

Review of:

[Fifteenth in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

"But the real characters of this country are immutable: wind, cold, drought, pebbles where soil should be and thorn bushes for grass. These cannot change within a millennium, and as long as they remain, Patagonia will be its savage self and its people will be set apart from all others."

George Gaylord Simpson (1902-1984) worked at the American Museum of Natural History in New York and later at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. He was perhaps the most prominent paleontologist of his time and one of the architects of the Modern Synthesis of the 1930s and 1940s, the scientific movement that gave rise to evolutionary biology as we know it today. His main research was in the early part Cenozoic Era, which began about 65 million years ago and continues today. During most of this time, North America, Eurasia and Africa were connected, off and on, while South America remained isolated. Simpson's treatment of the separate evolution of the south-american mammal fauna, before the closing of the Panama land-bridge three million years ago (Simpson 1980), is recommended for the non-specialist, as is his autobiography (Simpson 1978).

Earlier in this series, we have treated the Gran Chaco and the Pampa of South America. Now we go further south to Patagonia, a wild, inhospitable, sparsely-populated region extending from approximately 42˚S to 52˚S. Unlike some other cold, demanding regions, such as the Tibet or the central Andes, Patagonia was never the seat of a highly-developed civilization. Accordingly, tourism is almost entirely ecotourism. In northern Patagonia, I found a well-organized, government-regulated ecotourism sector that promises good conservation of the environmental base.

Cold, dry, almost treeless regions like Mongolia and Patagonia are excellent places to look for macro-fossils. The mineralized bones of long-dead land vertebrates can remain undisturbed and relatively exposed for eons. Charles Darwin spent about two years of his five-year voyage around the world in Argentina (Darwin 1989), including substantial travels in Patagonia, where he made some notable fossil discoveries.

Simpson first arrived in Argentina in 1930, just in time for the coup d'état that overthrew Hipólito Yrigoyen, then returned in 1933 and 1935, for a total stay of more than a year. This is the naturalist-in account of that time and place. He worked the area around the small town (now a city) of Comodoro Rivadavia in Chubut province. (Let me mention in passing that an inordinate number of places in Argentina seem to be named after military figures, which cannot be socially healthy. One can understand that every town has a square and street named for
José de San Martín, but it is unsettling forever to be bumping into the ghosts of Manuel Belgrano, Guillermo Brown, Julio A. Roca, Cornelio Saavedra and other slayers of many. But I digress.)

There is much here about the hard work and uncertainty of paleontological field work. Like any prospecting, the hunt for vertebrate fossils has a very large element of chance. One makes great effort to choose a likely site, and then one can work a cliff face for days or even weeks, finding nothing of significance, until suddenly one day something fantastic appears. The work in Patagonia led to a fabulous haul of new fossils, but it required a great deal of perseverance, intelligence and good luck.

Inhospitable as it is, Patagonia is by no means lifeless, and Simpson has a keen eye for living creatures. He mentions many of the characteristic mammals and birds, with more extensive accounts of the guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*, one of four New World camels), pichi (*Zaedyus pichiy*, a small armadillo), patagonian tinamou (*Tinamotis ingoufi*) and Darwin's rhea (*Rhea pennata*, one of two New World ostriches).

All in all, Simpson's attitude toward Patagonia is wonderfully ambivalent. Before going to sleep, we find him thinking "Life here is not a pleasure in the ordinary sense of the word -- but it has its compensations -- yes, on the whole I am happy to be here -- I do like it in spite of everything."

In spite of everything, we are left in no doubt as to the nature of "everything". It is not the cold, the almost constant hard winds or the daily hard labour. It is the people, whom Simpson sees as living under some sort of curse. Like any frontier area, Patagonia at that time was a refuge for failures and misfits. People arrived there with dreams of striking it rich and, when disillusioned, the vigorous ones quickly went back home and the rest remained. Predictably, the latter formed a society that was dysfunctional in large part, the sort of place in which you are always looking over your shoulder to see whether the crime has occurred yet." In the guest book of a country "hotel" he charitably wrote that "This is the most cheerless, God-forsaken, barn-like, clammy dump it has ever been my misfortune to find myself in." That's kicking them when they're down.

In these pages we meet many disreputable and unlikeable local characters, both those who considered themselves natives and the expatriates trying every measure to keep their children from going native. Both groups are mostly treated with humour. The only time Simpson shows real venom is in treating the community of immigrants from South Africa. He regards the Afrikaners as degraded and miserable, losing their humanity generation by generation.

Patagonia was (and is) not a region of high culture. Many of the locals were certain that Simpson and his assistant were prospecting for gold or something else of tangible value. To them, it was surely a preposterous lie that these two had come from another continent just to hunt for old bones out in the wilds. Besides, even if they really were after fossils, why would two educated men go to all that labour and roughing it, rather than just sit back in distant Buenos Aires and let their flunkies do the hard stuff? To those still clinging desperately to shreds of gentility, the Americans were a shocking enigma.
To end my account of this most engaging book, here is a long quotation to illustrate the sort of grand insight that Simpson derived from many months of digging in Patagonia:

“There are three sorts of changes in their animal life that distinguish these successive deposits and permit their recognition. Some of the animals in the older beds lived on, but the time is so great that they evolved into new species, and the descendants in the younger strata are unlike their ancestors in the older. Some of the ancient animals became extinct and left no descendants. And some of the younger animals have no ancestors buried in the older beds, but were immigrants whose ancestors had lived in some other part of South America. In these three ways, life was constantly changing, as it is still today.”

References


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