



Naturalist-in Series
BRINGING THEM BACK LIVE
by Chris K. Starr



Review of:

Gerald Durrell 1954. *The Bafut Beagles*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis 231 pp.

Gerald Durrell 1954. *Three Singles to Adventure*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis 219 pp.

Gerald Durrell 1961. *The Whispering Land*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis 235 pp.

[52nd in a series on "naturalist-in" books; see <https://ckstarr.net/book-reviews/>]

Frank Buck (1884-1950) was an American zoo collector and showman who wrote about his expeditions and played himself in movies about them. His best known is titled '*Bring 'Em Back Alive*'. These were heavy on adventure, with the emphasis on big, spectacular animals. He had little interest in anything small enough for a person to lift unaided.

Gerald Durrell (1925-1995) wrote zoo-collecting accounts of quite a different kind. His books have plenty of adventure, but none of the swagger about encounters with big, dangerous beasts that make Frank Buck and Steve Irwin so ridiculous. His early life on Corfu is recounted in the immensely engaging '*My Family and Other Animals*'.

After several collecting expeditions, Durrell (rhymes with squirrel) established his own zoo on Jersey in the Channel Islands in 1959 www.durrell.org/Wildlife-park. He believed that zoos should serve as reserves and regenerators of endangered species through captive breeding, and the Jersey Zoo is credited with saving several species from extinction.

Attention here is to his accounts of three expeditions, the first two as an independent collector for British zoos and the third for his own Jersey Zoo.

In many places he found, he could get much of the common local fauna from people who had them as pets. This seems especially the case among the Amerindians of Central and South America where, in the midst of the daily struggle for existence, the



Gerald Durrell. Source: *Country Life*

people love to keep pets. This is consistent with Edward Wilson's biophilia hypothesis of a deep-rooted human love of other living things.

He would start by letting it be known that he was buying. The word quickly got around that the foreigners would pay real money for animals considered quite ordinary, so all Durrell had to do was build cages and wait for the people to bring the loot. That of course only went so far, and his accounts are largely taken up with the rigours or finding and safely capturing the rarer species that do not appear as pets.

Acquiring the animals was just the start of the undertaking. There were plenty of escapes, so that animals often had to be recaptured. It is seldom practical to give wild animals their natural diet, and getting them adapted to an artificial diet often presents a special challenge. Some animals refuse to eat and must be released, while the giant anteater, for example, went right for the mixture of milk, raw eggs and raw mince beef with a garnish of live termites. There were also the immense difficulties of keeping a collection of diverse animals in good health. Durrell had to be something of a veterinarian, as when a baby peccary (quenk) came down with pneumonia.

Over and over in his accounts, we come to loving descriptions of particular animals. Although he was not a researcher, Durrell was an instinctive naturalist and eco-tourist, always eager to meet in their habitats wild animals that he had known only



Three-toed sloth. Source: Wikipedia

from books. As an example, in Guyana he compared the diet, locomotion and other habits of the two-toed and three-toed sloths.

Gerald Durrell – like his older brother Lawrence -- was a natural story teller, and each chapter is almost self-contained. He treated with uncondescending humour the people he met, with the exception of mean-spirited types, who received his scorn. Next to wild animals, there was nothing Durrell loved so much as a character. In his liberal use of humour, Durrell is more like a travel writer than a nature writer, although without the vapidness that makes most travel writing so atrocious. (One wonders how they get away with treating their readers with such contempt.)

He was fond of similes, and when you see one coming it almost always means he is about to say something droll. There were elephant seals "all lying about displaying the animation of a group of opium smokers", "an ancient woman dressed in black, which made her look like a somewhat dilapidated cockroach", while the orange-rumped agouti is "a large rodent with dark eyes, slender legs and the disposition of a racehorse suffering from an acute nervous breakdown." Another animal has "the expression of an elderly virgin who, after years of looking under the bed, has at last found a man under there", and a pygmy owl is described "with round yellow eyes that glared at me with all the silent indignation of a vicar who, in the middle of the service, has discovered that the organist is drunk." A pair of toads "waddled out onto the floor with all the indignation and dignity of a couple of Lord Mayors who had been accidentally locked in a public lavatory." And there is the "superbly scaly lizard, huffing and puffing with the astonishment

grading into rage of a Frenchman learning that the English consider their own cheese not only adequate but actually superior." Okay, I made up that one last, but Durrell could just as well have written it.

Durrell returned to Cameroon in 1949 for the expedition recounted in *'The Bafut Beagles'*, probably his most popular zoo-collecting book. His crew began work at the village of Mamfe, the site of his earlier expedition where the Cross River comes down from the mountain, and Durrell opens with a lyrical description of the locality. They also collected in the savanna highlands inland in habitats very different from the humid lowland forests.

However, the core of the book is about Bafut in the highlands at 6°05'N 10°08'E. At that time the traditional political structure still prevailed, headed by the Fon of Bafut. Achirimbi II, the 10th Fon, was in office from 1932 to his death in 1968. He was described by a district officer in Mamfe as "the most delightful old rogue" and a great drinker. The Fon was the only authority of importance, so that his good will was critically important. When Durrell's party reached Bafut, the Fon approached with his entourage (including his many wives) in a thoroughly royal manner. It was a good omen. The Fon proved to be a wonderful host. One evening while they were drinking together, he sent for a music band comprising about 20 of his wives to play for them. They arrived with an amazing set of instruments, giving rise to a great variety of sounds and much dancing.

There was a major ceremony 10 days after Durrell's arrival, and the Fon took the opportunity to enlist his people's aid. He also assigned four hunters to assist Durrell, who was able to get to work right away. These hunters and their pack of pot hounds came to be known as the Bafut Beagles, a title of which they were very proud. Their basic method was to choose a patch of savanna, spread their nets on one side, and then walk through with their dogs, driving animals toward the nets.

Especially engaging is Chapter 5, an account of a successful night hunt for the extraordinary hairy frog, *Trichobatrachus robustus*, whose very existence had been in doubt until then. *'Three Singles to Adventure'* is about an expedition to Guyana in 1950. Arriving in Georgetown, they had to select a base area. They looked over a map full

of alluring names and then, following a recommendation, they settled on the small village of Adventure at 7°05'N 58°25'W near the mouth of the Essiquibo River. There was no way Durrell was going to resist a place with that name. He went to the shipping office the next day, "Three singles to



(left) Poison-arrow frog. Source: US Fish & Wildlife Service; (right): Hairy frog. Source Wikipedia

Adventure, please."

As usual, the first order of business on arrival was to consult with hunters and other local people about what animals they wanted. High on their list were the giant otter, poison-arrow frogs, Suriname toad, capybara, Brazilian porcupine and curassow. He was also eager to get some common opossums (manicous), which flabbergasted the local people. The very idea that the English would pay good money for such despised vermin. Durrell gives a loving description of the creature's ugliness, notes its gross eating habits and concluded that there was nothing admirable about it. Or, as he expressed it, it was "an evil-looking, moaning creature with depraved tastes and not even the compensation of an attractive personal appearance."

There was a large lake nearby with an Amerindian village on the shore. Durrell went to the local school to tell the pupils which animals they sought. That yielded plenty of agoutis, lappes and monkeys. On the way back they had a magnificent view of a group of red howler monkeys in the glow of the setting sun.

From Adventure, they went to the Rupununi savanna in southern Guyana in search of animals not found in the forest areas to the north. Among his main goals was the giant anteater. He ranged widely on horseback with a guide, with many attempts to secure one with lassoes.

A zoo in England very much wanted a large caiman, and Durrell's crew was able to secure one at great effort and much danger. This was at a time when zoos were more like circuses than they are today. In modern times, if he had received such a ridiculous request, Durrell would have pointed out that a) at a fraction of the cost they could get a young animal, which would b) live much longer than the great big beast.

The final destination in Guyana was near Charity on the bank of the Pomeroon River. This is not very far from Adventure, but it is well inland in an area of streams, so that travel was mostly by canoe. Durrell estimated that they spent at least half of their working time afloat. This included a great deal of night paddling in these silent vessels in search of aquatic and amphibious creatures that were hidden or unapproachable in daytime. They met a great many caimans.

At the end there was a long ship journey across the Atlantic to Liverpool with about 500 animals in 150 cages, all requiring daily care.

The expedition described in *'The Whispering Land'* occupied about eight months of 1958 in Chubut and Santa Cruz provinces of Patagonia. Charles Darwin spent about two years of his round-the-world voyage in Argentina, and each chapter opens with a quotation from Darwin's *'The Voyage of the Beagle'*.

The expedition started with the maddening business of dealing with Customs bureaucracy, which took three weeks to get the equipment released. Then there was the long drive south from Buenos Aires to Patagonia. I have made that trip by bus and share Durrell's fascination with the marked changes in biome as one passes from the pampa into Patagonia. "By the simple action of crossing a river we entered a different world." Instead of the pampa, they were in "an arid waste stretching away as far as the eye could see ... a uniform pelt of grey-green scrub." What was especially notable was the silence, the absence of sound of birds or insects, just "the whispering of the wind through the thorn scrub". The expedition's core area was the 3600-km² Valdés Peninsula, which reaches out into the Atlantic right at the northern edge of Patagonia.

Among the notable creatures on the coast is the magellanic penguin, the northernmost penguin on the Atlantic side of South America. It has large breeding colonies toward the northern end of



Magellanic penguins at their nesting burrows.

Patagonia, where it nests in burrows scattered over the breeding area. Durrell's group lived among a penguin colony for three weeks, observing their daily pattern of movement between burrows on land and their foraging area in the sea. There is a vivid description of adults returning to the burrows full of fish to regurgitate to their chicks. Each adult had to run the gauntlet of hundreds of other chicks who attempted by main force to get them to give up their cargo. And on reaching its own burrow, an adult would be assaulted in similar fashion by its own chicks. I once watched a pair of chicks – almost adult size, but still with their baby plumage – vigorously harassing their father for food in this fashion.

One of the four species of New World camels, the guanaco, lives in small herds in Patagonia. Watched by a guanaco as he was still lying in camp one early morning, Durrell remarked that "He wore the supercilious expression of his race, the faint aristocratic sneer, as if he knew that I had slept in my clothes for the past three nights."

Coming over a rise one day, they suddenly saw a huge breeding colony of fur seals on the coast below. "As we reached this vantage point the noise of the animals smote us, roar, bleat, gurgle and



Guanaco. Source: Wikimedia Commons

cough, a constant undulation of sound, like the boiling of an enormous cauldron of porridge."

Given the wealth of wildlife on the peninsula, Durrell wished it could all be made a wildlife sanctuary, noting that with roads and other infrastructure it could become a valuable tourist attraction. He got his wish, although not quite in his lifetime. In 1999 it was declared a nature reserve and is today a UNESCO World Heritage Centre. At least in that part of Patagonia, in my experience, virtually all tourism is ecotourism, and the well managed Valdés Peninsula is an important source of revenue for the province.

During a trip into the mountains Durrell was eager to meet and collect vampire bats, at that time not found in any European zoo. He sat and watched the horses at night, waiting for the bats to arrive. But then he fell asleep and awoke to find bites on the horses' necks. The next night he used himself as bait, leaving one of his feet exposed --he was curious to know if the bite was painless as reputed - - and made an effort to stay awake and keep an eye on the horses. In the morning he was surprised to find that some of the horses had been bitten, but he had not.



Vampire bat. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The book has a moving passage about examining a friend's collection of stone artefacts from the area's long-exterminated Amerindians. He felt their ghostly presence in an area where their arrowheads and other relics were still encountered. 

References

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