Book Reviews

Glass, B. (ed.): The Roving Naturalist. Travel letters of Theodosius Dobzhansky. Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society 1980. 327 pp., 1 fig. Soft bound $ 8.00.

This volume is a posthumous edition of travel letters to various friends written by that grand man of *Drosophila* evolution, Theodosius Dobzhansky, published as a Memoir of the American Philosophical Society. It is a delightful, easy to read, straight-forward and compelling account of those journeys the good doctor, his family and fellow researchers took because of his research, to collect animal data, insect material and toward the last, especially, for lectures and meetings.

The first short section, compiled from an oral recollection, is an account of his first trips during the summer months of 1926 and 1927 when, as an Assistant Professor, he led groups of students on horseback into Central Asia to collect data on domestic animals for the new Russian Society. The rest of the book are travels he made after his move to the West, 200 of the final 260 pages covering his travels in South America, especially Brazil, and written very soon after the events. The last portion are essay-accounts of his late-in-life trips to Israel, Lebanon and Egypt; to India; and to Indonesia and New Guinea. These three sets, his Central Asian, his tropical, and then his Asian travels are all differently written and each has its own character. However, they all show off his remarkable powers of observation about the physical world, his incredibly fast abilities at communication with and understanding of native peoples, and his amazing powers of recollection and comparison, all blended in a simple prose style that is immediate, fluid and lucid. The book is hard to put down.

Throughout the book there are many instances of a surprising observation, aptly put. Many of these keen and trenchant observations derive from what must have been an instant, full and sympathetic knowledge of the people through whose good graces (induced by invaluable "letters of introduction") he could make his travels. He was forever, until the last large group, moving through such primitive conditions with the attendant immense, personal discomfort and frustration that would have had most of us retiring to the comforts of our civilized cities and a hotel after just a few hours of experience that we can only marvel at this man's voracious appetite for, in particular, *Drosophila* and all things tropical.

Dobzhansky described himself early on as a pessimist, but he does not fool us. While he displays irritation and distress at people who pretend to be other than they are and at poverty, what overwhelms us is his immense joy at life, at nature, especially that exuberant, shouting, uplifting, powerful, abundant object of his abiding love, the tropics.

His writing is remarkably free of prejudices, but you get an idea of his political and religious views. What is more, these change as the letters proceed, their sharp lines softening. More and more, his philosophy of live enters in, as he thinks more deeply of what he has seen. Travel for Dobzhansky continuously brings home how distressingly different the human populations are, in how they do things, in what they accept as normal and abnormal, in what and how they think. For him as for us, this distress becomes acute and at times appalling when thrown together in a situation allowing no escape with a representative of that other culture and comparison of reaction ensues. Apparently Dobzhansky had developed an art of zeroing in on these differences as quickly as possible, but in that process he soon reaches a point beyond which he found it was to painful to go. He is forever outraged by the poverty that he sees, but he is wise enough to know that he as a traveler and visitor can not change it and that it results from a complexity not allowing of simplistic solution. His outrage is that of a fair, objective and moral man.

Throughout all of this book, he gives us a message of hope, a sure knowledge that we, all nature and especially we humans, are all one. His sure disgust was reserved for those who would count themselves as better than others, for he could not abide rascists; his sure hope, was a knowledge that the world will yet be one world, one people, one throught.

I felt a keen sense of regret when coming to the end of the book, for the great pleasure I was feeling would soon come to an end; that I did not want. My hope is that there may be more letters waiting to be published, for this book reveals to us a man, a student of evolution, and we watch him evolve from a young passionate observer to a deeply committed, compassionate human. A most interesting travel of a remarkable life.

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