

BOOK REVIEW

What every entomologist ought to read

The species seekers

Heroes, fools and the mad pursuit of life on earth

Conniff Richard, 2011. Norton & Co., New York-London, 464 pp.

This book is no less than a delightful and effective justification of our science, entomology. But it is much more: it is an enjoyable, well told, memorable summary of the birth of taxonomy and the discovery of the Earth's biodiversity.

Scenes and stories are richly told, from Dejean, amateur entomologist and soldier, finding time to pick up a darkling beetle in the moment before an attack in the Spanish-French war (which proves to be a new species to science, *Cebrio ustulatus*), to the history how these discoveries formed and deepened our understanding of ourselves.

The book starts out with the birth of the Linnean classification system, the subsequent outpouring of Linneaus "apostles" to various corners of the world, (several of whom died during their journey). In general the age of the amateur naturalists is sympathetically presented. The colourful, often bizarre personages of this exciting age and activity are presented in memorable detail, stories are told with verve and gusto - the pace never slacks and my interest never faded. A brief foray into the problem of how to preserve specimens is followed by the discussion of the shake-up of the human self-perception in the wake of the new discoveries of various animals, especially primates. Other important steps are delightfully told, including an interesting retelling of the Darwin-Wallace story of the discovery of natural selection. The rise of the professional scientist and the reason for the amateur-professional antagonism (hopefully overcome by today) is also plausibly discussed.

Conniff has done his homework well. As far as I can judge, the facts pan out, the details are in good order, and overall, I trust the information written. And there are lots of new facts for me, even about entomology. Perhaps the plant world gets a little less attention than is due, but I am only griping because, being an entomologist, I would have liked to widen my horizons by this enjoyable writer.

The book ends with the description how malaria, one of the historically most damaging diseases, its pathogenicity and mechanism of spread were discovered. This latter story is also fairly told, giving justice to scientists who have been unjustly sidelined, including Italian entomologist Grassi, so important in solving the malaria mystery. There are plenty of such stories when the reader feels that "justice has been done, at last". The book closes with a "Necrology" - a list of scientists, with brief biographical notes, who died in search of new species.

Every entomologist should read this book, then translate it into their language (I have already started) and give as many copies as possible as presents to their friends, relatives, and colleagues. There can hardly be a better device to convince them of the importance of natural history, ecology and taxonomy. In Richard Conniff, we as well as all other taxonomists have a great champion and we all should be grateful for this fine and enjoyable book. I feel even naming a newly discovered species after him is deserved.

Gabor L. LÖVEI, Department of Agroecology, Aarhus University, Flakkebjerg Research Centre, 4200 Slagelse, Denmark.
e-mail: Gabor.Lovei@agrsci.dk