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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### The Remarkable Life of William Beebe: Explorer and Naturalist

Carol Grant Gould

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C. William Beebe (1877-1962) stood out for many years as the most famous naturalist in North America, perhaps in the world, not just a respected public figure but a true celebrity. He was a formative influence on a great many young naturalists of the early 20th century. This fame continues today in durable, if muted form. One can even log onto “The Official William Beebe Web Site” – what can “official” possibly mean in this case? – at <http://members.aol.com/chines6930/mw1.beebe1.htm> for a fan’s-eye view of his life and writings.

Like almost all serious naturalists, Beebe turned to natural history at an early age. He attended Columbia University, but did not graduate, preferring instead to join the newly established Bronx Zoo of the New York Zoological Society (NYZS) as assistant curator of birds. He early turned to tropical exploration and first visited Trinidad in 1908 and Guyana in 1909. Under Beebe’s prodding and guidance, the NYZS established Simla as a research station in Trinidad’s Arima Valley in 1949 after earlier stations in Guyana and Venezuela had been devalued by surrounding agricultural development and political instability.

Beebe’s research had three main thrusts. He began as an ornithologist, doing taxonomic studies with a large biological component (see e.g. *Pheasants: Their Lives and Homes*). Establishment of field research stations, including Simla, was motivated by the belief that the tropical environment and its wildlife were best understood through long-term studies at fixed sites (e.g. *Tropical Wildlife in British Guiana* and *High Jungle*). And he is perhaps best remembered for his undersea exploration, including a series of descents to unprecedented depths in the bathysphere with its designer, Otis Barton (e.g. *Beneath Tropic Seas* and *Half Mile Down*). In these latter, Beebe and Barton were able to observe strange creatures never before seen alive and intact, if at all.

In his writings, Beebe was both engaging and extremely prolific, so that a bibliography occupies an entire book (Berra 1977). Berra lists 23 books and 821 articles by Beebe. Of the latter, about 100 are original research reports. His fame during his lifetime largely rested on an outpouring of popular articles that drew credibility from

the fact that he was, after all, a scientist, not just a journalist reporting what others had found. Some of his many books – I am aware of 24 volumes of which he was author or editor – are compilations of these articles. It was an age of grand scientific explorations, complete with sizeable teams and voluminous baggage, just the sort of thing to fire the reading public’s imagination. The hazards of tropical and marine field work were greater than they are today, although Beebe’s narration of some episodes is sufficiently lurid that one suspects some exaggeration.

This kind of biology was and is relatively expensive, so Beebe had to exercise considerable political skills to gain the necessary funding. In this, he had advantages available to few other naturalists. He had the backing of the New York Zoological Society and of some very influential friends. Among these latter were former president Theodore Roosevelt and several millionaires with an interest in natural history. And the public popularity of his writings certainly strengthened his hand.

The scientific value of the deep-sea explorations and of much of Beebe’s land-based work remains controversial. While the general public enthused, many contemporary biologists saw them more as adventures than research, and it must be admitted that Beebe is very little cited today as a source of new data. As an example, I have seen his paper on the ecology of the Arima Valley (1952) rarely cited even by biologists in Trinidad.

At the same time, Beebe was certainly a major contributor to new results in a different, indirect way. In promoting field stations to be utilized over time by a variety of researchers, he pioneered a new approach to the understanding of tropical plants and animals, one that relied on a deep entry into their environment. Similarly, his early studies of pheasants in the wild, for example, added greatly to the understanding of a group that was mostly known only from dead museum specimens. And his papers detailing the organisms to be found in four square feet (1916) and later of one-quarter square mile (1925) of forest leaf-litter in Guyana presented a radically new way to look at a microhabitat.

Unlike many other leading naturalists of his time,

Beebe wrote no autobiography and strenuously objected to any suggestion that anyone else should undertake his biography. His personal papers went to Princeton University, where they remained sealed for many years. His reasons are not obscure. Beebe was very protective of his image, and as far as he was concerned, the abundant details of his life and activities in his books was all the public needed to know.

This wish that no one else should write his life has not been respected, and rightfully so. Robert Welker's (1975) intellectual/literary biography of Beebe is a strong, valuable book within its limitations. Welker could not see Beebe's personal papers and did not interview the many people alive who had known and worked with him, so that his sources extended very little beyond Beebe's published writings. In particular, there is next to nothing on family background and early years. Still, Welker took care not to reach beyond the evidence in interpreting Beebe's thoughts and character, and he was well qualified to assess Beebe's scientific legacy.

Now comes a second book-length biography that satisfyingly transcends these limitations. Carol Gould had access to the personal papers and the full co-operation of Jocelyn Crane, Beebe's closest scientific associate and successor as Director of Simla. Her treatment also benefits from interviews with Crane and others and various auxiliary unpublished documents. In addition, she presents a much more complete treatment of Beebe in the context of his many associates and the NYZS. This, then, is the definitive Beebe biography.

Even so, there are various types of biography, and this one makes no attempt to be all in one. In contrast to Welker's book, Gould's is only slightly a literary and hardly at all a critical biography. Rather, it is a straightforward, sympathetic, thoughtful and thorough account of Beebe's life and person. It is very close to the autobiography Beebe might have written if he had chosen to do so. In fact, this is very much an authorized biography, as Gould was chosen by Crane, who held the keys to the rich mass of unpublished material and the co-operation of Beebe's living associates.

Many of Welker's remarks about Beebe's personality and science were deeply resented by the latter's friends and admirers. While Gould – very much a Beebe admirer – presents a picture at variance with Welker's, she makes no attempt to directly dispute any of the criticisms. Gould's assessment of Beebe as a researcher is neatly summarized in the following passage (page 408):

“The effects William Beebe had on science, particularly deep ocean biology and neotropical ecology, are enormous and lasting. He made an effective transition between Victorian natural historian, content to collect and classify the natural world, and the modern experimental

biologist, alive to the effects of its natural habitat and mode of living on every aspect of an animal's life.”

In fact, I found no mention of Welker at all outside of the bibliography at the end of the book. When I asked about this, Gould told me that she had seen Welker's book as so very different in nature from her own that it was better to simply disregard it. Maybe, although many readers will likely find it surprisingly odd that she did not at least mention this earlier biography in her preface, if only to set it aside. And it would have been relevant to say more pointedly why the above quoted assessment is accurate and Welker's much less laudatory view is mistaken.

The book is physically very attractive, richly illustrated with photos, well organized and written in a clear, engaging style. In the early pages Gould indulges in some bits of purple prose – as, when treating the dangers of field exploration in the early 20th century, she writes of “paddling up plague-ridden rivers in Malaysia, and bushwhacking through malarial jungles in Borneo” [since when do rivers carry plague?] – but then settles down to a consistent narrative sobriety. The account of the worldwide 1910-11 expedition to study pheasants is especially gripping. The 37 chapters are grouped into four sections with focus on a) formative years, b) studies of birds, c) studies of marine life, and d) tropical ecology. The chapters on Simla will be of special interest to readers in Trinidad and Tobago.

In short, *The Remarkable Life of William Beebe* fills a long-standing need. At the same time, those with a serious interest in understanding Beebe's place in ecology and natural history will want to treat Welker's book as a valuable supplement.

As a final note, let me mention that it would be worthwhile if someone did a comparative treatment of Beebe and Raymond L. Ditmars (1876-1942), the herpetologist who joined the Bronx Zoo staff at the same time as Beebe and whose life and prolific writings show many parallels. (Disclosure: As a boy, I was much more a Ditmars than a Beebe fan.) Just a thought.

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**Christopher K. Starr**

Dep't of Life Sciences,  
The University of the West Indies  
St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago  
*E: mail: ckstarr99@hotmail.com*

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