Reading for Pleasure

Armchair adventures

PAUL CORWIN

Travel books are perennial favourites. They offer the reader a delicious escape from daily tedium and often provide a painless history and geography lesson. This vaguely intellectual yet escapist literature appeals to closet puritans who would not be caught reading a detective or spy novel.

The first and most remarkable travel book that I would like to share was recommended to me by a fellow mountaineer who once paddled a canoe through the Straits of Magellan and up the Chilean coast. He enthusiastically told me of the definitive book on the region, *Uttermost Part of the Earth*. Surprisingly, our local library had a copy of this little-known book and I spent the next weekend in Tierra del Fuego. The book is the autobiography of E Lucas Bridges, the son of an early English missionary to Tierra del Fuego. Lucas grew up among the Indians there in the late nineteenth century and became the first Westerner to live among the Fuegians and master their language. He was talked into recording his life by Aime Tschiffely, the great South American traveller whose delightful book *Tschiffely's Ride* is another classic.

Fuegians and Arabians

The Fuegians lived in one of the harshest climates on earth, but they had only rudimentary shelters and only the Ona tribe used clothes. Unfortunately, nothing prepared them for the arrival of "civilisation" and the story of their rapid decline through disease, alcohol, and firearms makes a sad and familiar story. Bridges saw it all happen in his lifetime, and, though he tried to stem the tide, it was a hopeless battle. Today only a few pure-blooded Fuegians remain, and during my friend's three-month canoe trip he came across only a few lone Alacaloofs paddling their bark canoes along that rugged coast.

Captain Fitzroy of the *Beagle* spent four years charting the little known coast of that region in the early nineteenth century. He kidnapped three Indians and took them to England with a view to civilising them and making them Christians; in those days the two processes were evidently considered to be related. The result augured poorly for future efforts of this kind. The natives, christened Jimmy Button, York Minster, and Fuegia Basket, were returned to Tierra del Fuego with dishes, books, clothing, and a ring that King William IV had presented them with at a royal audience. When Fitzroy returned a year later the three natives had all reverted to their original way of life.

Charles Darwin was with Fitzroy and he is responsible for several misconceptions about the Fuegians. Bridges effectively refutes Darwin's mistakes, including the ideas that their vocabulary was limited to a few hundred words and that they were cannibals. Bridges's father compiled a dictionary with over 32 000 words in Yaghan, and Bridges himself noted their

abhorrence of cannibalism. Even when they were starving they would not eat vultures for fear that the birds may have fed on corpses. Darwin was obviously not cut out for anthropology.

The Ona tribe inhabited the mountainous interior of Tierra del Fuego and had no contact with outsiders. As a child, Bridges's ambition was to explore the mountains of the interior and meet this tribe. How he achieved this ambition and thus prevented the Ona from dying out without trace is the climax of this extraordinary book.

Wilfred Thesiger is a travel writer who should need no introduction. He was acclaimed as the greatest of Arabian explorers by St John Philby. Like E Lucas Bridges he observed a culture just as it was being overwhelmed by change—precipitated, in this case, by oil discoveries. During his travels in the late 1940s Thesiger realised that the centuries-old Bedouin way of life would not survive the automobile and wireless. In *Arabian Sands* he describes his five years spent exploring in and around the "empty quarter" of Arabia. Like the great Arctic explorers, Thesiger went totally native. Steffansson really did little more than live like the Eskimos and persuade them to do a bit more travelling than they might otherwise have done. Thesiger's approach was identical, and he became the first European to cross the empty quarter twice. (I continually marvel at the arrogance and stupidity that doomed explorers from Franklin to Scott, who failed to learn from the people who lived in the environments that they sought to explore. Many of Franklin's men appeared to have starved to death within sight of well-fed Eskimos.) Like Bridges's book, *Arabian Sands* is a mixture of history, anthropology, and adventure. Thesiger went on to live among the Marsh Arabs of Iraq. Although his time there lacked the romantic appeal of desert exploration, Thesiger again showed his mettle as a great traveller by living with these people from 1951 to 1958. *Marsh Arabs* is the fascinating account of those years. His knowledge and love of the Bedouin certainly give the reader a far greater understanding of the Arab mind and culture.

Aid and anthropology

John Greenway is another desert traveller. As an anthropologist he spent 15 years in the Australian deserts living with and studying aborigines. In *Down Among the Wild Men* he shows his deep love for the Australian land and people, especially the inhabitants of the fierce inland deserts. He spent much of his time with aborigines who had had no previous contact with "civilisation." While recording songs with one such group he was amazed to hear:

*Bornana moute toppa tennette,
green tate inna lanada pree
bornana wooda toh e newebree tree
kilima ba enewa onee tree
Daby, Daby Crocka, kingada wile prontee?*

Such are the surprises and delights of an anthropologist.

Greenway's account of the circumcision rites of these people

is not for the faint hearted. The aborigines practised not only circumcision but also subincised the penis from meatus to scrotum and then evulsed the canine teeth. Any undue display of pain could well mean that the initiate was summarily killed. As with the above books the combination of history, adventure, and anthropology makes for compelling reading.

Although it is less exotic than Patagonia or the deserts, I found the Italian world described by Ann Cornelisen in *Torregreca* no less interesting. Torregreca is Cornelisen's name for the town in southern Italy where she worked under the auspices of the Save the Children Fund in the late 1950s and 1960s. Initially she laboured under great handicap for she was not only foreign but a Protestant and a woman. The book has two interwoven themes: an account of the way of life of the peasants in Torregreca and Ms Cornelisen's encounter with this culture.

She attempted to break the vicious cycle of poverty endemic in southern Italy by establishing nurseries where young children

could receive mental stimulation as well as much-needed nourishment. Needless to say, in a community such as Torregreca—where social change occurred at a glacial speed, despite many invaders over the centuries—Ann Cornelisen met with innumerable difficulties from both the dominant church hierarchy and the local communists. The difficulties were overcome by her love for the people and admiration for the dignity with which they faced a hard life. As the locals grew to trust her she was able to glean at first hand the intricacies of their lives.

In recalling travel books that I have read over the last few years the ones which stand out in my memory share one characteristic—the writers were not mere travellers through the land, but stayed long enough to learn the language and live among the people they subsequently wrote about. In this age of jet travel and what Koestler calls the "coca-colonisation" of the world it is a joy to read books that immerse the reader in an alien world. I hope the few I have suggested do just that.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Caveat coelenterata

How inviting seem North Queensland's tropical seas. Gleaming white beaches fringed with gently waving palms, azure water sparkling in the tireless summer sun, and not another soul to sully the wave-smoothed sand. But you swim at your peril. Oh yes, the great white and the hammerhead, the mako and the tiger sharks still lurk in the deep, but rare indeed are attacks on man or woman. No, the locals fear far more the near-invisible, insidiously menacing stingers: the cruel, gently swimming coelenterata, the jellyfishes. And what venomous creatures are such as *Chironex fleckeri*, the "box jellyfish" or "sea wasp"; *Physalia*, the Portuguese man o' war or "bluebottle"; and *Pelagi*, the "little mauve stinger." In they drift on a north-east wind, almost impossible to see, but trailing feet or yards of deadly filaments, each packed with hundreds of nematocysts containing a potent venom which can be discharged through a minute thread into their victims' skin. The sea wasp, far more virulent than its insect namesake, is not to be trifled with. The tentacles wrap round the unsuspecting swimmer, causing instant agonising pain and the eruption of massive linear wheals, which heal but slowly and frequently result in permanent scars. Death from shock and respiratory failure may be rapid.

Paddling about in the shallow water as the tide recedes from the Barrier Reef you are safe from the jellyfish, but not from the ugly, indolent stonefish. Beware placing an unprotected foot or hand on this odious creature: unbearable pain results from the poisonous dorsal spines penetrating the skin; muscles are paralysed and, if the water is deep, you may be incapable of swimming to safety. Octopuses make good eating, but leave to its own pursuits the *Hepalochlaena maculosa*, the blue-ringed octopus. A seemingly harmless little fellow, no more than four inches in size, its hardly noticeable bite injects a potent neurotoxin which paralyses all voluntary muscles. Shell collectors should avoid the cone shells, which can extrude proboscises capable of injecting a similarly acting poison. And then there are the toadfishes, the stinkfishes, the scorpion fishes, the . . .

Maybe those icy English seas are preferable after all.—GARTH HILL (Brisbane).

Winter indoctrination

The chance to leave the confines of the base hospital for the snowy spaces of the Rocky Mountain foothills proved too attractive to miss. What better way to spend early December than with a tent group in the pine forests?

The initial period was spent in the classroom dealing with the intricacies of dressing—clothing light, loose, and in layers—and in completing the checks of our equipment. A daytime trek on snowshoes in the base area and setting up the Arctic tent allowed a final assessment before climbing aboard the lorries to travel 50 miles into the Rocky Mountain Forest Reserve.

The first reaction on arrival was one of awareness—gone was the background noise of the city, the restricted horizons; now the Rockies

20 miles or so to the west, and a wide valley at our feet, with pine and snow covered hills to our front. The second thought as one started working was the hard physical labour of walking in the winter. The daytime temperature at the time was about minus 25°C. The extra clothes required weighed 20 lbs; a rucksack carrying additional requirements and sleeping bag added another 50 lbs. I carried a medical pouch under the parka, pressed against the abdomen for warmth (to prevent the medicines freezing) and every 500 yards or so I took my turn in steering or pulling the 200-lb toboggan. Snowshoes were essential to prevent the overburdened man sinking deep in the powder snow, and one of the most arduous duties, apart from pulling the toboggan, was breaking trail: pressing the snow down for the rest of the tent group.

Our group of seven swiftly fell into the pattern established back in base. Everything was shared. No privacy was given or accepted as solitude is dangerous. Any step outside the immediate camp required full protective equipment and rucksack, sleeping bag to be taken. Over the next few days a pattern of behaviour became established; the comic, the stupid, the countrywise all became evident. To a recent arrival from England the Canadian forests were a surprise. Advised by a young soldier who had run his own trapping line, I was taught how to identify the various plentiful prints in the snow; moose in abundance, deer, rabbit, weasel, marten. All had their individual and attractive markings. The city dweller is lost in this wilderness. The men enjoyed teaching their doctor how to set snares, catch birds, dig snow shelters, and generally survive.

With warnings of a Chinook to come we left the forest, knowing that survival, even comfort was possible at minus 47°C (the low on one night) and that the conveniences of home will mean just a little bit more.

Back in Calgary with temperatures of plus 15°C the knowledge gained is stored for use as required, to gain acceptance in the consulting room, give guidance for the future, as stories for another occasion, or, possibly, to survive if the need arises—E P GREEN (1 Field Ambulance, Calgary, Alberta).

A 30-year-old woman has developed coarse hair on the dorsum of her hand after injury and subsequent encasement in plaster for one month. Is this common?

Orthopaedic surgeons have often noticed this apparent increase, which may result from the hair growing longer since it is less exposed to the weathering influences of friction and cleansing agents etc. True hypertrichosis, in which the hair shaft diameter is increased and the hair is often more pigmented, may occur when there is repeated or longstanding inflammatory change affecting the dermis—for example, over a scar—but this is not recognised as common after encasement in plaster.