

Walks on the wild side

David E. Allen

Bright Paradise: Victorian Scientific Travellers. By Peter Raby. *Chatto & Windus*: 1996. Pp. 276. £20.

SOMEONE really ought to make a special study of the debt owed by science to the alluring diversity of the order Coleoptera. It is well known that Charles Darwin had a beetle-collecting craze before the *Beagle* voyages, but less so that it was the same shared passion that first brought together Alfred Russel Wallace and Henry Walter Bates, the two great explorers of the Amazonian faunas. This is but one of numerous *trouvailles* to be gleaned from Peter Raby's extremely readable book.

Just as Lytton Strachey discovered a rich literary seam by quarrying the piously massive 'life and letters' tomes of which the Victorians were so fond, so Raby has boiled down into a more digestible form the multivolume adventures of the travellers and explorers of that period, rescuing these narratives from the near oblivion into which they have fallen.

On the argument that "the investigation of nature was the great nineteenth-century work", he has chosen scientific travel as his ostensible binding theme, although he has pardonably strayed from that in one or two cases where the motive seems rather to have been exploration pure and simple. Foremost among these is that of the remarkable Richard Lander, a Cornish innkeeper's son, who penetrated parts of the West African interior, where many grandly sponsored and well-provisioned expeditions had earlier come to grief.

It did not necessarily follow that scientific minds functioned scientifically when they arrived in untrodden parts, however. Francis Galton, of all people, showed next to no interest in the fauna and flora on his pioneering trip to southwest Africa, returning (in Raby's words) "as narrowly English and imperial in his attitudes as he was when he set out".

Fortunately, there were others with rather more curiosity and very much more persistence, some of whom spent years on end in the remotest of regions with little or no contact with civilization, let alone with like-minded travellers. The botanist Richard Spruce, for example, one of a trio whose Amazonian wanderings in search of specimens are grippingly recalled afresh, was away from home for as long as fourteen years without a break. Bates, his zoologist counterpart, was absent for a scarcely less heroic eleven. They had to cope with fever, endless torment by insects, hostile natives, dangerous animals, and at times a breakdown in communications with the

outside world so extreme that their clothes were reduced to rags and their money ran so short that they were lucky not to starve.

Wallace, Bates and Spruce were comparatively unusual in subsisting as freelances, gambling on finding and sending safely back enough that was rare or novel to earn them sufficient from the natural-history dealers in London to enable them at least to survive and cover their expenses. It was a slow way of making a living, as Raby drily remarks: at one point one of them had less than £27 to show for almost as many months of extremely assiduous collecting.

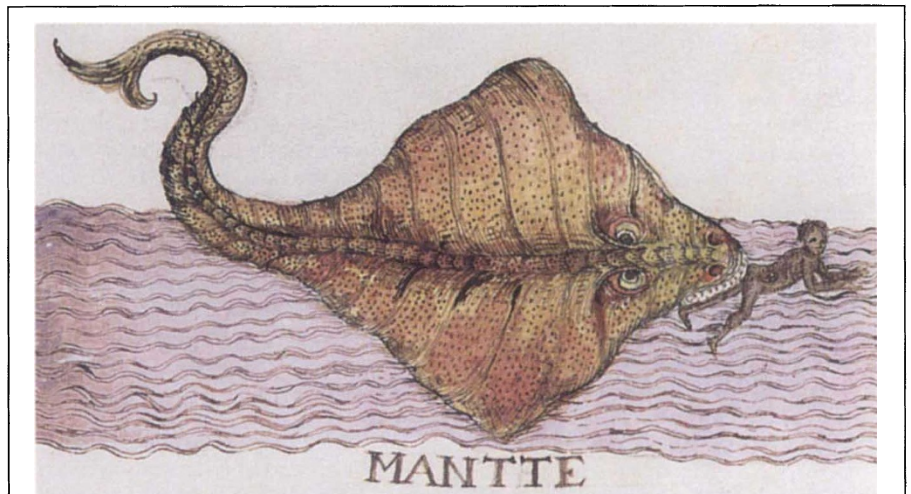
More typically, work of this kind took place under some form of official sponsorship, either directly, like many expeditions sent out after 1735, under the auspices of one government or another, or indirectly, by attachment as an individual to the crew of a naval vessel. Darwin was lucky enough to be engaged as one of those gentleman companions whom the British Admiralty found increasingly necessary to keep its ships' captains sane on gruellingly long voyages while maintaining a strict social distance from the rest of the crew, as laid down by regulations. Darwin's less affluent contemporaries T. H. Huxley and Joseph Hooker had to make do instead with service as ships' surgeons, the duties of which Huxley in particular was to find a continually frustrating distraction.

The best solution was something between those extremes: funded and sponsored by government, which helped to open official doors, but travelling on alone, which maximized freedom of action. Such was the dual privilege enjoyed by Hooker for his classic journeys to the Himalayas which are best remembered today as the origin of so many of our garden rhododendrons. Yet even that loftiness of status was not enough to save Hooker from much time-wasting obstructiveness and, on one occasion, even risk to his life whenever he ventured outside regions under British jurisdiction.

Most of Raby's subjects were male (and most, too, were British), but he does not overlook the indomitable Mary Kingsley, who foraged among the mangrove swamps of West Africa without forgoing her normal full skirts, and armed with nothing more fearsome than an umbrella. Nor does he fail to include the imperious Marianne North, who captured in paint the jungle flora that her predecessors had thought only to collect.

A specialist in English literature, Raby devotes a closing coda to examining how the Victorian scientific travellers changed the European view of the world and led to the rise of a new mythology mediated through the novels of writers such as Rider Haggard and Joseph Conrad. To provide a sense of time and place, the book is illustrated with well-chosen portraits of some of the chief figures discussed, as well as with a series of maps of tropical regions taken from *The Times Atlas* of 1895; these last, alas, are sadly muddy. □

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WHILE travelling abroad, beware of the mantte, or manta ray, which was thought to be very fond of pearl-divers. This is one of about 200 watercolours painted by French Huguenots accompanying Sir Francis Drake on his voyages to the West Indies. The collection, known as *Histoire naturelle des Indes* and held at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, has been reproduced in full in *The Drake Manuscript* (André Deutsch, £39.95).