Fall 1987

EHA -- A Naturalist on the Prowl

Claude A. Prance

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
EHA — A Naturalist on the Prowl

Claude A. Prance

I wander into the jungle, where ‘things that own not man’s dominion dwell,’ and there I prowl, climb into a tree, sit under a bush, or lie on the grass, and watch the ways of my fellow-creatures, seeing but unseen, or, if seen, not regarded; for beasts and birds and creeping things, except when they fear man, ignore him, and so they go about their various occupations, their labours and their amusements, without affectation and without self-consciousness. This is the way to read the book of nature, and after all there is no book like that. It never comes to an end, and there is a growing fascination about it, so that when once you have got well into it, you can scarcely lay it down.

A fascinating book that never ends! It can be picked up or put down just as one wishes. What more could one want? The writer of this passage included it in his book A Naturalist on the Prowl, published in India as long ago as 1894, and he hid under the anonymous signature of EHA. His full name was Edward Hamilton Aitken, and he spent many years in India and wrote fascinatingly about the wildlife there.

Aitken was born in 1851 at Satara in the Bombay Presidency and was the son of the Rev. James Aitken, a missionary of the Free Church of Scotland. He was educated by his father and later at Bombay University, where he obtained both B.A. and M.A. degrees, coming at the top of the list and subsequently winning the Homejee Cursetjee prize for a poem. From 1870-76 he was Latin Reader in the Deccan College at Poona, then he entered the Customs and Salt Department of the Government of Bombay. In 1903 he was appointed Chief Collector of Customs and Salt Revenue at Karachi and in 1905 was made Superintendent in charge of the District Gazetteer of Sind. He retired in 1906 and went to live in Edinburgh where he died in 1909.

A Naturalist on the Prowl was not EHA’s first book, for in 1881 Thacker, Spink, and Company of Calcutta had published his The Tribes on My Frontier: An Indian Naturalist’s Foreign Policy,
a series of papers written during the Afghan War of 1878-79 and contributed originally to the *Times of India*. The author says in his preface, "They come on the stage again in answer to what vanity fancied was an encore. Perhaps it was the voice of the Scotsman crying, 'Ong-core! Ong-core! We'll hae nae mair o' that.' " The book was delightfully illustrated with fifty drawings by F. C. Macrae, many humorous. The wildlife is described around what the author calls Dustypore, actually Kharaghoda on the Little Ran of Cutch near Bombay, a village where he lived and which housed a large government salt factory and works for the recovery of magnesium chloride, but no commercial information appears in the book, which is concerned solely with the animals, birds, and insects around his bungalow. As in all his books he treats his subjects with a delightful sense of humor. He stresses that his prowling is not to kill but to study the ways of animals in their native haunts.

His first chapter, entitled "A Durbar," describes some of his attendant court. "The myna is the most proper of birds, respectable as Littimer himself." Dickens lovers will remember David Copperfield's painfully irreproachable valet. He continues, "In his sober, snuff-brown suit and yellow beak, he is neither foppish nor slovenly, and his behavior is stamped with self-respect and good breeding. Nevertheless, he is eaten up with self-admiration, and, when he thinks nobody is looking, behaves like a fool, attitudinizing and conversing with himself like Malvolio."

Then he goes on to describe other members: the hoopoe, the ant-lion, the sinister-looking butcher-bird searching for anything living to eat.

"The touch of nature which makes the whole world kin," he writes, "is infirmity. A man without a weakness is insupportable company, and so is a man who does not feel the heat." There is a large grey ring-dove that sits in the blazing sun (it is 110 degrees in the shade) all through the hottest hours of the day, but his sympathies lie with those creatures which "confess the heat."

Living in India can have many trials, and he says "that all my own finer feelings have not long since withered up in this land of separation from 'the old familiar faces,' I attribute partly to a pair of rabbits. All rabbits are idiotic things, but these come and sit up meekly and beg a crust of bread, and even a perennial fare of village moorgee cannot induce me to issue the order for their execution and conversion into pie."
In his chapter on “The Rats” he states he is an enemy of the race, but softens towards the unpersecuted and inoffensive muskrat and says its only fault is its odor. He describes how the mother rat brings her young family out to see the world. “The first-born takes hold of her tail in its teeth, its tail is grasped by the next, and so on to the little Benjamin at the end, and thus the whole family, like a hairy serpent, wriggles away together—a sight, I admit, to make one’s flesh creep; but, looked at in a proper spirit, it is a moving spectacle, full of moral beauty.” This serpent provides F. C. Macrae, EHA’s illustrator, with one of his most attractive drawings in the book, which is even reproduced, gold-tooled, on the front cover of the book, and is reminiscent of E. H. Shepard’s drawings of mole in *The Wind in the Willows*.

Passing over his chapter on the mosquito, we come to the more attractive subject of lizards, for, as he says, they were once great. “They were the aristocracy of the earth,” and he speculates amusingly on the golden age of lizards and concludes “that which was up is down.”

One of his most fascinating chapters is that devoted to “The Ants,” in which he describes the gory battle fought in his bathroom between the reddish-brown ants and the truculent, hot-blooded, large black ants, in which neither emerged the victor. As he says, Solomon has advised us, or most of us, to go to the ant and consider her ways—but it is of vital importance that we go to the right sort of ant. “The ant to which Solomon sent the sluggards was plainly the agricultural ant which lives in the fields. A space of ground round the mouth of its hole, about as wide as the hat of a padre whose views are just beginning to get ritualistic, is always cleared, like a threshing-floor... These holes are the gateways of great cities... Late and early these roads are thronged with crowds of busy ants.” He continues, “I once killed a centipede and very soon a foraging ant found it.” He describes in his humorous way how messages were passed back through other ants, and eventually a vast gang of laborers arrived; each seized a leg of the centipede, a leviathan to the ants, and the stupendous mass was moved home. Other chapters deal with crows and other birds, bats, bees, wasps, spiders, butterflies, frogs, bugs, white ants, and such small fry, but all giving delightful and humorous pictures of their subjects.

EHA’s second book was *A Naturalist on the Prowl*, published in 1894 with eighty drawings by R. A. Sterndale, himself a naturalist.
and author of several books. Again the essays are reprinted from the *Times of India*, and the author states in his preface that for their subject and inspiration they are indebted to the glorious forests of North Canara on the west coast of India. The book has a frontispiece showing a caricature of the author "On the Prowl." In his first chapter he tells his readers, "Do not degenerate into a collector and cease to be a naturalist," and he advises readers to study wildlife in its native haunts. As in the earlier book his humor is evident in every chapter, and he covers subjects such as crabs, the king cobra, the banyan tree, the monsoon, beetles, monkeys, caterpillars, parrots, spiders, and he finishes up with a panther hunt which ended up tragically (—or did it?).

He gives an interesting account of the caterpillar of the brilliant blue butterfly, belonging to the family of *Virachola*. "The birthplace of this proud creature is the fruit of the pomegranate. In the very heart of the fruit it passes its early life, feeding on the forming seeds, for ventilation and sanitation it makes a hole in the tough rind, and every day sweeps out its apartments with a shovel which grows on its tail. Soon it would fall to the ground and rot, and its inmates would perish miserably. But before this can happen the caterpillar comes out by night and ties the fruit to its stalk so securely that it will defy the winds for a year to come."

In a later chapter he complains of the rain: "We have had nearly eleven feet already, but the total goes on rising at the rate of several inches a day." He goes on to say it is good for the crops, but he adds, "The crops of mould and mildew grow rank beyond all precedent. If I neglect my library for a few days a reindeer might browse upon the lichens that whiten my precious books. The roots of these vegetables, penetrating the binding, disintegrate the glue underneath, so the books gradually acquire a limp and feeble-minded aspect, and presently the covers are ready to come away from the bodies; and the rain has undoubtedly some effect of the same kind on ourselves."

Again he speculates on the little boys busy all day flinging stones at the beautiful Rose-headed Parakeets who frequent the rice fields, but he adds, "The son of the rice farmer is a utilitarian, and in this disjointed world of ours there is a hereditary feud between the useful and the beautiful. It should not be so: there must be some way of reconciliation, but no one has worked it out." The whole book is packed with information and shows the genial man and entertaining naturalist.
In 1889 EHA published his third book, *Behind the Bungalow*, with forty-two illustrations by F. C. Macrae, who had done the drawings for his first book. As before, these papers had appeared in the *Times of India*. EHA has, however, deserted his animals and insect friends and tells us of the human elements of his household, the Indians who work for him, and there are more than a dozen of them. When *The Graphic* reviewed this book it commented, "The Tribes on My Frontier was very good: *Behind the Bungalow* is even better." EHA brings his sense of humor very much to the fore in describing his domestics. We get delightful pictures of the various types of 'Boy': the Boy at Home, the Dog-Boy, the Gorawalla, or Syce (Horse-Boy), the Butler, Domingo the Cook, the Man of Lamps, the Hamal (cleaner of the house), the Bodyguard (messenger and child's servant), the Dhobie (washerman), the Ayah (nurse), the Pundit (schoolmaster), the Dirzee (tailor), the Malee (gardener), and a host of Miscellaneous Wallahs. It is a most entertaining and highly original march past of 'Our Nowkers,' the usual train of domestics and tradesmen who served an Anglo-Indian household of around the turn of the century.

Although to the Western mind many of these characters have very odd and eccentric habits, they are here set before us in a genial, understanding, and extremely good-tempered parade which we thoroughly enjoy. Even the "Postscript" pleases us, for the author added it to include the Gowlee, or Doodwallah, because he might otherwise complain of being left out in the cold. He is a character of delight, and is the milkman who walks up the garden path morning and evening erect as a betel-nut palm, with a tiara of graduated milk-pots on his head, and driving a snorting buffalo before him. The milkman is more than that, for he is "a man of substance, owning many buffaloes and immensely fat Guzerat cows, with prodigious humps and large pendent ears. His family having been connected for many generations with the sacred animal, he enjoys a certain consciousness of moral respectability, like a man whose uncles are deans or canons." This attractive book rightly maintains its place as the most popular of all its author's works.

A rather different type of book was published in 1898, *The Five Windows of the Soul*. Here EHA writes of how the five senses bring man and beast into contact with their surroundings, and he thought it was his best book, although it is the least well known. A more popular book was *The Common Birds of Bombay*, first
issued in 1900. Philip Gosse, Sir Edmund Gosse's son, described this as quite different from most bird books in the way the author deals with his subject and in the delightful style in which it is written.

A further book published posthumously was Concerning Animals and Other Matters, which appeared in 1914, issued in England by John Murray. This was illustrated by J. A. Shepherd and contained a memoir of the author by his friend, Surgeon-General W. B. Bannerman. In addition to much on animals it contained chapters on “The Indian Snake Charmer,” “Cures for Snake Bite,” “A Hindu Festival,” “Indian Poverty,” and “Borrowed Indian Words.” The essays in this book appeared first in the Strand Magazine, Pall Mall Magazine, and the Times of India, and were mostly written after EHA retired to Edinburgh. Again he has much of interest to say on animals and birds. He maintains that the Barn Owl is a friend of man and that the actions of gamekeepers in destroying it are founded on ignorance, and he mentions Charles Waterton as having pointed this out very many years ago. Again he indicates many errors as to snakes and says they are clean, beautiful, and among the most graceful of things. As to cures for snake bites, he maintains that far more Indians are cured to death with quack remedies than ever die from the snake’s poison. His chapter on borrowed Indian words makes interesting reading, and, among those of Indian origin in common speech in English, he lists pepper, shawl, calico, chintz, pyjamas, shampoo, bangle, loot, caste, punch, toddy, and surprisingly cheese, and, of course, words like cheroot, curry, and kedgeree, which most people know come from India.

The writer of his Memoir states that even in the Gazeteer of the Province of Sind, of which Aitken was appointed Superintendent in 1905, there is evidence of his light, graceful, literary style and witty and philosophical touches. This was his last published work before he left India in 1906 on his retirement from the Government Service. However, during his years in the country he had been a frequent contributor to the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society. Here there are many contributions of his own and some others in which he collaborated with his friends James Davidson, T. R. Bell, and E. Comber. To this Journal his friend Surgeon-General Bannerman had also contributed, and in 1909 the Journal contained an obituary of EHA written by T. R. Bell. Aitken was one of the founder members of the Bombay Natural History
Society, its first secretary, and editor of its *Journal*. In 1902 he was elected a vice-president of the Society.

Aitken was fortunate in his publishers, Thacker, Spink, and Company, in that they produced his three best-known books in delightful format and well illustrated. All included at the end sets of advertisements running from thirty-two to forty pages, well illustrated, and giving some idea of what was available to Anglo-Indians in the 1880s and 1890s. To our modern eyes the quaint advertisements are full of charm.

E. H. Aitken was an observant naturalist expert at passing on to others the results of his observations. When his friend Bannerman was doing research to trace the causes of plague, he approached Aitken for help in the work. It was during an expedition to Goa, on which he was sent by the Government, that EHA discovered a new species of mosquito, the cause of malaria, and it was later named after him, *Anopheles aitkeni*. He also showed that the English black rat had become a domestic animal, like the cat in Britain, and that it spread plague.

In appearance Aitken is described as a “long, thin bearded man, with typically Scots face which lit up with humorous twinkle,” and he was said to have charm and magnetic attraction. He was married and had two sons and three daughters.

During his lifetime and for some years afterwards EHA’s books were popular in India and were well reviewed in England in journals such as *The Field, Chambers Journal, The Graphic, The World, The Queen, The Daily Chronicle*, and *The Saturday Review*. Of his first book, *The Tribes on My Frontier*, issued in 1881, there were thirteen printings down to 1927; *A Naturalist on the Prowl* had reached a fifth edition by 1917; while of his most widely read book, *Behind the Bungalow*, there were many printings from its first issue in 1889 down to 1929.

Several English authors have praised his work: in 1920 E. V. Lucas paid a visit to India, and in his book *Roving East and Roving West*, 1921, he tells how in Bombay in the hottest part of the day he passed the time and imbibed instruction by reading “the three delightful books of the late E. H. Aitken,” and he continues, “No more amusing and kindly studies of the fauna, flora, and human inhabitants of a country can ever have been written than these.”

Philip Gosse, who was sent to Bombay in 1917 as an Army Medical Officer, records in his fascinating book *Traveller’s Rest,*
1937, that he was given a copy of *The Common Birds of Bombay* and was so attracted to the writer that he searched the Bombay bookshops until he found copies of other works by EHA. He found that the closeness of observation of nature reminded him of that other naturalist, W. H. Hudson, but pointed out that Aitken possessed a keen sense of fun, a quality completely lacking in Hudson. He found also that this diverting aptitude for recognizing the humorous side of life, human or otherwise, kept bubbling up in all EHA's writings, and he was told that this was so even in his annual reports for the Customs and Excise Department of India. Of the three major books Gosse has much to say, and he maintains that *Behind the Bungalow* may be said to take its place in the all-too-short list of Anglo-Indian classics. He speculates that had EHA lived and worked in England his writings would have been better known and better appreciated than they are, for he is a distinguished writer of English prose. Surgeon-General Bannerman, who knew him for many years, stated that because EHA had found company in beasts all his life, he kept the charm of youth to the end. He added that Aitken studied natural history not only for its own sake, but as a means of benefiting the people of India.