

## *Obituaries*

### THOMAS BARBOUR

The scholarly world in our generation has contained a few men as impressive as Thomas Barbour, but among them perhaps he alone has been as really great as he was impressive, as wise and learned as he was charming. His abnormal height and breadth of shoulder seemed not only natural but necessarily concomitant to his greatness of mind and heart.

He was born at Martha's Vineyard on August 19, 1884, a son of William and Julia Adelaide (Sprague) Barbour, and was educated at Browning's School in New York. From childhood he was addicted to zoology, and from the day when the Harvard museum curator ignored his boyish suggestion that an incorrect label on some dried toads be changed, his passion was to become the head of that museum. When he was a freshman he published his first paper on zoology, and that summer he was a member of the party which began the Bermuda Biological Station for Research. His next summer vacation was spent on a sponging schooner in the West Indies where the hardships which he experienced so impressed him that, he later claimed, he was never again able to regard with indifference good food and drink. As an undergraduate he spent most of his time in the University museum and only later learned that there were social clubs in which one of his family and fortune would have been very welcome. In adult years he said that he regretted having spent so much time with the reptiles in the museum and so little with his fellow members of the Class of 1906.

On October 1, 1906, Barbour married Rosamond Pierce

and, armed with a commission from the museum, carried her off on a collecting trip to India, the East Indies, China, and Japan. After another turn at the museum he was sent, at the age of twenty-four, as the official Harvard delegate to the first Pan-American Scientific Congress, and he took the occasion to collect his way around and across South America. By the time he paused to take his Ph.D. in 1911 he was famous in his field. His particular interest was the geographical distribution of reptiles and amphibians, and one of his early activities was taking a census of snakes in the Canal Zone so that people might be reasonably sure what bit them. Working with the United Fruit Company he started the serpentarium at Lancetilla, Honduras, to raise venom to be used in the manufacture of anti-venom. In the tropics he worked as only a man of unusual strength could. He cleared with his own machete a place for the establishment of the Barro Colorado Island Laboratory at Gatun Lake where for some time he was executive officer.

In 1912 Dr. Barbour became Associate Curator of Reptiles and Amphibians at the Museum of Comparative Zoology and corrected the label on the dried toads; fifteen years later he became Director of the University Museum and of the Museum of Comparative Zoology. Sitting in Agassiz's chair at Agassiz's desk he had misgivings as to his own fitness, but those who have seen the revolutions which he accomplished in these and other institutions know that he was over-modest. He was a good professor of Zoology among many, but as an organizer of Zoological museums and research institutions he was without equal in his generation. The Harvard Biological Laboratory and Botanic Garden in Cuba, and the Boston Society of Natural History, of which he was president or trustee for many years, are but two of the many organizations which show his genius as an organizer.

In spite of his incredibly detailed knowledge of his special

field, Dr. Barbour was interested in many other things. He was, for example, a member of the administrative board of the Harvard Institute of Tropical Biology and Medicine, of the advisory board of the National Park Service, and of several bodies, governmental and otherwise, interested in cooperation with Latin America, particularly in the field of agricultural education. During the First World War he did intelligence service in Latin America and worked with the War Trade and Shipping Board and with the Havana office of the Food and Fuel Administration. For many years he was curator of books relating to the Pacific in the Harvard library. Something of a book collector himself, he had an urge to see preserved in the proper institutions printed materials which do not yet interest collectors but which will certainly be hard to find in years to come. His friendship with this Society originated in this instinct of his, and he was elected to membership in 1935. Although he rarely attended our meetings he was one of the most faithful of our gatherers of current material, and on occasion he would undertake to obtain a long run of some periodical for us. Fully aware of the problems of institutions like this he urged us to keep available "a large, spacious scrapbasket" for such of his contributions which might not fall within our fields of collection.

The list of Dr. Barbour's societies and honors is much too long to be included here. He published some four hundred scientific papers, but most of his popular fame rests upon the four entirely delightful, semi-biographical, books which he wrote in his later years. Two more which remain in manuscript have been promised to the public which joyfully read the earlier volumes.

Dr. Barbour died suddenly on January 8, 1946. He is survived by Mrs. Barbour and by three daughters.

C. K. S.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.