

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

# Camps in the Caribbees: The Adventures of a Naturalist in the Lesser Antilles<sup>1</sup>

Frederick A. Ober

## Dominica

Late in the afternoon ... we descried a speck dancing on the waves, which speck was, of course, a boat; and in that boat, when it reached us, I engaged passage for the shore, my unhappy companions drifting about until the next afternoon, sometimes in sight, sometimes lost of view for a long time. As we neared shore I had time to examine the character of the scenery of the western coast, as one object after another was unfolded, and the mass of green and blue resolved itself into wooded hills, narrow valleys, and misty mountain-tops that reached the clouds. A planter's house gleamed white in a valley; a pebbly beach stretched between high bluffs, with a grove of cocoa palms half hiding a village of rude cabins along its border.

I was approaching an island of historic interest and scenic beauty, of which the events of one and the elements of the other are little known to the world at large. It is the first island upon which Columbus landed on his second voyage. Having been first seen on Sunday, it was called by him *Domínica*, and this event dates from the 3d of November, 1493. Blest isle of the Sabbath day! Many changes has it known since the great navigator first saw its blue mountains and landed upon its fragrant strand.

Does it read like a fairy tale, this second voyage of Columbus? With three ships and fourteen caravels, containing fifteen hundred persons, he set sail from Cadiz, touched at the Canary Isles, and then shaped his course for the islands of the Caribs, of whose prowess and fierce nature he had heard many stories from the mild people of Hispaniola. At the dawn of day, November 3d, a lofty island was descried to the west. As the

ships moved gently onward, other islands rose to sight, one after another, covered with forests and enlivened by flights of parrots and other tropical birds, while the whole air was sweetened by the fragrance of the breezes which passed over them.

## Grenada and the Grenadines

Skirting the belt of mangroves bordering the lagoon, one morning in March, I anxiously searched the intertwined branches for iguanas. Grenada is celebrated as being the home of great numbers of these reptiles, which may often be found basking on old walls within the limits of the town. My boatman was a negro, who, accustomed to the appearance of the iguana in the trees, discovered one long before I could distinguish the difference between the reptile and green leaves. Even after it had been pointed out, I had difficulty in recognizing it, so nearly did its colors harmonize with those of the tree in which it was feeding.

It lay quite still, stretched flat upon a branch, its tail hanging down like that of a snake. Though it was evidently suspicious of our intentions, its quiet was not due to that alone, for it is normally a sluggish animal. Yet, when once thoroughly aroused, it will dash over the ground at great speed. I fired, yet it still clung tenaciously to the bough, and a second shot did not kill it, for it would have escaped had not my boatman pinned it with an oar, after it had fallen into the mud. From one that we captured that morning, the man with me procured a dozen large, white eggs, which he saved to eat...

The order *Sauria*, the lizard order, is well represented in the West Indies, though in none of the smaller islands between Porto Rico and Trinidad is to be found that greatest of the saurians, the alligator. The Indians of Dominica, to whom I described the alligator, were greatly amazed to hear of a 'lizard' twelve feet in length, as they had never seen one larger than an iguana, which seldom attains a greater length than five feet, and is as mild in disposition as the alligator is sanguinary. The islands, especially the shores, are teeming with lizards of every color, of every variety of marking, and of all sizes.

Especially do they love the cliffs, and if you are walking through the bushes at the base of any sunny precipice, or over any rocky tract, you will be startled by the frequent dashes made by these reptiles across your path. In a country where you must keep every sense on the alert, to guard against sudden surprise by serpents or poisonous insects, it is very annoying, often startling, to be so frequently disturbed by these active creatures. In the mountains are fewer species, and they are more sluggish, but



CLENN GEMBER

A Saban iguana (*Iguana iguana*), "I had difficulty in recognizing it, so nearly did its colors harmonize with those of the tree in which it was feeding."

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from the book with this title published initially in 1879.



HANS E. A. BOOS

Fer-de-lance (*Bothrops lanceolatus*), “The dread of the serpent is universal. It seems to possess a hatred for man; and it is seriously avowed by the natives that it will lie in wait for an opportunity to inflict death.”

in the warm lowlands you must be very active to capture one.... They are not poisonous, though repulsive to many, and though some of them will bite severely, they do not inflict dangerous wounds.

There are many hideous forms, especially among those of South America, like the Basilisk and the Flying Dragon; but in the West Indies there is none more hideous than the iguana. Never was more harmless creature invested with more frightening aspect.... In the islands where it exists it is eagerly sought as food, and its flesh is palatable and delicate, as I can testify from experience, being white, tender, and nutritious.

The good father Père Labat (worthy missionary and *bon vivant* withal) compares fricasseed guana to chicken for the whiteness of its flesh and delicacy of its flavor....

#### Some Summer Days in Martinique

Centipedes and scorpions also abound here. Indeed, it seems that nature has bestowed upon this island of Martinique all the pests and scourges known to these islands; for only here and in the adjacent island of St. Lucia is found that most venomous and vengeful of all serpents, the Lance-head snake *Craspedocephalus lanceolatus* [= *Bothrops lanceolatus*]. The isolation of this snake on these two islands, when its nearest habitat is Guiana, is one of the most vexing stumbling-blocks to one studying the distribution of animals. How came it here? Was it introduced, or is it indigenous? Was it wafted here upon some

floating tree, or was its home here from the beginning? The correct solution of this problem would, doubtless, throw some light upon that more important and gigantic one, Were these islands once a part of the continents? Certain it is, the adjacent islands of Dominica and St. Vincent, separated from these channels less than thirty miles in width, are free from this scourge. Nay, more; it is recorded that, during the wars between the English and the Caribs, in the last century, the Lance-head was carried to the islands just named, but could not be made to live.

Annually, during the crop season, many laborers are killed in each island, for this snake has its hiding-places in the canes as well as the forests. It has been so abundant that in this garden the pleasant walks and shady drives are nearly always deserted. A serpent over seven feet in length, killed in the garden, is shown in the Museum. There is, it is said, no antidote for its bite.... The poison is quickly fatal, and decomposition rapidly follows.... The dread of the serpent is universal. It seems to possess a hatred for man; and it is seriously avowed by the natives that it will lie in wait for an opportunity to inflict death. The country people live in continual trepidation, and very few of them will venture from their houses after dark, even in the suburbs of the city.



St. Pierre, Martinique in 1888, 14 years before the eruption of Mt. Pelee, “Indeed, it seems that nature has bestowed upon this island of Martinique all the pests and scourges known to these islands; for only here and in the adjacent island of St. Lucia is found that most venomous and vengeful of all serpents, the Lance-head snake...” (Lanceheads from Martinique, St. Lucia, and mainland South and Central America are now considered separate species). Photograph courtesy of Philip Walwyn



ROBERT POWELL

“The islands, especially the shores, are teeming with lizards of every color, of every variety of marking, and of all sizes.” *Anolis aeneus* from Union Island (The Grenadines) (left) and *A. richardii* from Grenada.