BOOK REVIEW

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Dr. G. Ledyard Stebbins, Jr. (1906–2000) led a life full of passion for botany, teaching, mountain climbing, classical music, and politics. He made vast scientific contributions and is considered the founder of evolutionary botany. Many contemporary botanists learned plant evolution from Variation and Evolution in Plants, Flowering Plants: Evolution Above the Species Level, and Chromosomal Evolution in Higher Plants—those who learned plant evolution in Dr. Stebbins’ classroom usually caught his contagious passion for botany.

Ledyard made considerable contributions to the conservation of plants in California through his association with and leadership within the California Native Plant Society (CNPS). In 1968, he started a card file of plants with limited distribution which eventually evolved into the Rare Plant Program that maintains and publishes the CNPS Inventory of Rare and Endangered Vascular Plants of California, the definitive source of rarity information for California plants (http://cnps.web.aplus.net/cgi-bin/inv/inventory.cgi). He served as president of CNPS from 1966 to 1972 and was made a fellow of the organization in 1976.

The Ladyslipper and I is an enchanting autobiography by this legendary figure and serves as a who’s who of the early contributors to our current state of knowledge about plant evolution. This autobiography provides an intimate portrait of the many life passions that Ledyard embraced and is written in a delightful story-telling fashion typical of his oratory and teaching style. One disappointment is the brevity in which a few personal tragedies were addressed, but despite being the hub of academic and social circles, Ledyard was a private person.

The first several chapters tell of an early interest in nature fostered by privileged and indulging parents and Ledyard’s own curiosity and intellect. One of the most insightful of Ledyard’s childhood stories is his recollection of boat trips with his parents at the age of five to admire bog plants that the whole family venerated. Subsequent years and chosen vignettes cover the awkwardness associated with growing up male and not athletically inclined, but highlight a counterpoint growth in his connection with nature with numerous explorations in Seal Harbor, Pasadena, Colorado Springs and Santa Barbara. Ledyard’s account of a 1924 cross country auto trip with a boarding school companion in a modified Model T exemplifies his lifelong passion for travel and adventure.

The chapters dealing with Ledyard’s life as an undergraduate and graduate student at Harvard show a young man learning about himself and his true interests in life despite them being disappointing to his family. These recollections also reveal the sometimes hostile disagreements that can occur between academics with different perspectives and theories. These chapters are interspersed with scientific studies, nature explorations, travel adventures, and punctuated with personal and intellectual milestones. High points included publication of his first paper, attending an international botany congress, and eventually gaining his Ph.D. from Harvard.

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