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‘AFRICAN NATURALIST. THE LIFE and TIMES of RODNEY CARRINGTON WOOD, 1889–1962’

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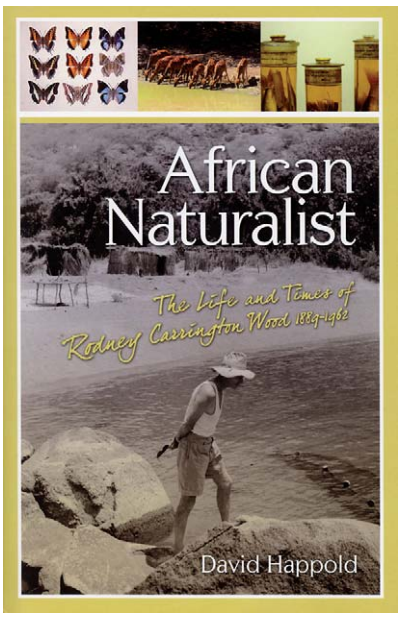
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BOOK REVIEW

'African Naturalist. The life and Times of Rodney Carrington Wood, 1889–1962.' David Happold. The Book Guild Ltd: Brighton, UK, 2011. i–xx + 1–290 pp., 50 ill., 24×16 cm. Hardback, dust cover. ISBN: 978-1-84624-555-8. £17.99 excl. p&p. Available from: www.bookguild.co.uk; publicity@bookguild.co.uk. In South Africa can be ordered through Exclusive Books & Wordsworths Books.

For anyone interested in the natural history of Africa and the growth in our knowledge of the continent's flora and fauna, this book will be a most interesting read. Rodney Carrington Wood was clearly a man with a passion for Africa and its biota. He was also an unusual character, on the one hand flighty and unable to stick to a task for any length of time, yet on the other a dedicated and talented natural historian. In this latter mould, he built up a formidable knowledge of the countryside in which he lived (mostly Malawi), based on first hand observations and experience, such that those who knew him regarded him with esteem. He was also a person happy to share this knowledge with others, and in so doing entertain and inspire them.



Although David Happold, himself a natural scientist, never actually meet Wood, through his own research on Africa's mammals he clearly recognised the importance of Wood's contribution. Happold chronicles Wood's early days as a young boy in Britain, perhaps providing a little too much detail – impatient as I was, I couldn't wait for him to get to Africa. However, it was as a schoolboy in Scotland that Wood developed a keen interest in natural history. Here he learned the importance of corresponding with experts and, though he himself could not be described as a scientist, this was to be where he really made his mark from a scientific perspective. During much of his life in Africa Wood collected specimens avidly, sending well provenanced samples back to Britain to be studied by museum experts. No doubt they were delighted to receive them and many of the specimens he sent turned out to be undescribed species, a good number described and named in due course after Wood, their discoverer. Significantly, it was Wood's collections of fish from Lake Malawi that first brought to light the astonishing diversity of fish-life in this ancient lake, subsequent study of which has contributed greatly to speciation theory.

The meat of the biography is about Wood's life in Malawi, but prior to this Happold cleverly sets the scene for Wood's arrival there by giving an interesting summary of the history of early explorers in the region and the trials and tribulations they had to endure. Many prominent names are mentioned and it was fascinating to read how their paths crossed in those early days. After Wood arrives he has to earn a living, which he

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does via a surprising number of means – in the cotton industry, as a tea planter, game warden and school teacher. Almost throughout, however, he pursues his natural history passion, which is perhaps one of the few consistencies in his persona.

In some respects Wood was a man ahead of his time, for even in the early years of the twentieth century he expressed grave concern at the loss of Africa's wildlife and rallied against the wholesale destruction of game in the tsetse fly campaigns. In this regard he resembled Dr Ernest Warren, the first director of the KwaZulu-Natal Museum, who had earlier expressed prescient concern over the persecution of large game animals in South Africa. Happold also ponders how Wood might have been worried at the extent to which natural habitat had diminished during his many years in Malawi. Paradoxically, Wood clearly had no clue about the impact of alien organisms and happily transported plants from one place to another during his travels.

As he nears the end of Wood's life, Happold takes the reader to the Seychelles where his subject spent most of his later life in idyllic tropical surroundings (he evidently abhorred the cold). It was here that his activities become of special interest to the KwaZulu-Natal Museum, for here Wood occupied much of his time collecting sea shells, building up an important and well documented collection that he eventually donated to the Umtali [now Mutare] Museum in Zimbabwe and which, through exchange, is now incorporated into the KwaZulu-Natal Museum's Mollusca collection.

I commend David Happold for providing us with a detailed and interesting account of the life of one of the more significant 'naturalists' living in Africa in the early to mid twentieth century. His book is thoroughly researched and well-written – it gives one a real feeling of life in early twentieth century Africa, albeit from a rather colonial perspective. It also provides a good example of the contribution that individuals like Rodney Wood have made to both the documentation and conservation of Africa's biota. Although in these days the term 'naturalist' has been somewhat devalued, in Happold's words 'in the way it is used to describe [Rodney] Wood, it is a great compliment'—a sentiment with which I concur.

Dr Dai Herbert

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