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Chicago Natural History Museum

Chicago
Illinois

THOMAS BARBOUR, 1884-1946

BY JAMES L. PETERS

*Plate 12*¹

THOMAS BARBOUR was born on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, August 19, 1884, eldest of the four sons of William and Julia Adelaide (Sprague) Barbour. His father, a director of the great linen mills of William Barbour and Son, located near Lisburn, Ireland, made frequent business trips to Europe, on which he was often accompanied by his family; hence Tom began his travels at an early age.

Private tutors and Browning's School in New York prepared him for college. During his boyhood he had many contacts with the outdoors but none so surely influenced and guided an instinctive bent for natural science as did his first visit to Florida in 1898. Following an attack of typhoid fever in that year he was sent to recuperate at his Grandmother Barbour's winter home at Eau Gallie, Florida. She, Sarah Elizabeth Barbour, was a most unusual character, a born naturalist, an excellent shot and an expert with a fly rod. She and her fourteen-year-old nephew fished in Lake Washington and travelled about southern Florida. It was she, also, at this time who took him to Nassau in the Bahamas for his first glimpse of the American tropics for which he then and there developed a lifelong absorbing interest.

Tom's mother had no outdoor interests whatsoever, but his father

¹ Photograph by Joseph Dixon.



Thomas Barlow

was fond of shooting and fishing, owned a share in the Tupper Lake Club in the Adirondack Mountains of northern New York State, and finally acquired the property, increased his holdings, and at the time of his death owned 45,000 acres. Here Tom and his three younger brothers passed many happy summers.

Tom was originally destined for Princeton, but then occurred one of those tricks of fate that must be regarded as the real turning point in his life. In the spring of 1899 a friend of his father's, who had tutored Tom after his attack of typhoid, took him to Commencement at Harvard. Tom spent an entire afternoon alone wandering about the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy, and fell in love with it on the spot. After that first visit he made up his mind that he was going to Harvard and not to Princeton.

He entered Harvard as a tall, gangling freshman in the autumn of 1902 and chose a room in Conant Hall which was the nearest dormitory to the Museum. During his undergraduate years, all the time that was not demanded by his attendance at classes was devoted to the Museum; perhaps it would be more correct to say that in what time he felt he could spare from his natural history pursuits he attended classes. Although he got off to a poor scholastic start in his freshman year, his marks during the remaining three years were mostly A's and B's, and he was graduated with the degree of A.B. in 1906.

In October of that same year he married Rosamond Pierce of Brookline, Massachusetts, and together they left on a honeymoon which took them to the East Indies. His family contacts enabled them to visit many places far off the beaten track—Darjeeling, India; a boat trip up the Irawaddy to Bhamo; Java, Bali, Lombok, Celebes, the Moluccas, New Guinea; thence to China and by steamer up the Siang River to Wuchow [now Tsangwu].

Every possible moment ashore while in the East Indies was devoted to collecting specimens representing nearly all branches of zoology, all of which found their way to Cambridge; several interesting new species were secured, and, what is more, were recognized by him in the field as probably new—a testimonial to the wealth of information that he had absorbed from Samuel Garman at the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy during his student days and from his extensive reading.

Then back to Harvard for his A.M. which he received in 1908. In that same year he went to Chile as a delegate to the First Pan-American Scientific Congress, held at Santiago, and, as might be expected, availed himself of every opportunity for collecting.

After taking his Ph.D. at Harvard in 1910, he represented the Association of American Universities at the reopening of the University of México in México City.

Likewise in 1910 he was appointed Curator of Reptiles and Amphibians in the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy and immediately set about building up the collection of those groups, but his interest in the Museum did not end with his own department. The next few years saw him sponsoring collecting trips as well as travelling extensively himself, chiefly to his beloved American tropics. He purchased several important ornithological collections for the Museum, notably the Swann collection of Accipitres.

His activities at the Museum were suspended during World War I while he was engaged in special intelligence work in Cuba, which required a knowledge of Spanish, but were immediately resumed when his services were no longer required by the U. S. Government.

On November 1, 1927, he became Director of the Museum, an ambition that he had cherished since that day in June, 1899, when, as a fifteen-year-old boy, he first wandered through its halls. He set about his new duties with his usual energy. In some ways the building seemed hopelessly archaic; with the exception of the library, most of the rooms (if they had any artificial illumination at all) were inadequately lighted with gas. There was a hand-hoist freight elevator, but the staff had to trudge up long flights of stairs to the collections; the exhibits were crowded, poorly displayed, and inadequately labelled. The public galleries were temporarily closed while the exhibits were rearranged, cleaned up and new labels prepared; the remainder of the building was wired for electricity and an electric passenger elevator replaced the antiquated hand-hoist with its splintery rope.

Other far-reaching changes that he inaugurated included an enlarged staff, with Harvard Corporation appointments in place of Museum appointments, and a closer tie-in with the University whereby some of the senior curators were given titles of 'Professor of Zoology' so that students could take research courses under those men and receive academic credit.

Tom's love for the American tropics has been frequently mentioned, but this does not convey any idea of the knowledge that he possessed of them. His greatest interests lay in Central America and the West Indies. In these lands bordering the Caribbean there was scarcely an island on which he had not set foot nor a country in which he had not travelled. Everything there appealed to him; he liked the people, the climate, the architecture, the scenery, the rich vegetation; the problems of geographic distribution and origin of faunas intrigued him. Spanish was a second tongue to him and his fluent use of that language opened doors that would be closed to the average foreigner and enabled him to make friends with people in all walks of life and gave him entrée to the out-of-the-way places, ordinarily so difficult of access.

This gift led directly to the last of the really great ornithological discoveries in neotropical America. While on one of his visits to Cuba, he had been into the northeastern corner of the Zapata Swamp and heard rumors about some strange birds to be found there. He therefore sent Fermin Cervera, who had accompanied him on previous visits to Cuba, on a series of trips into the region, with the result that *Ferminia cerverai*, *Torreornis inexpectata* and *Cyanolimnas cerverai* were first made known to science. Never one to let the grass grow under his feet, he described these new birds promptly—the wren in 1926 and the other two a few months later, in May, 1927. On the latter occasion Tom was ill in Philadelphia, but called me in Cambridge, and over the telephone we drew up the generic diagnoses and the plumage descriptions, and the paper appeared by the time he was back in Cambridge a few days later.

Another of Tom's achievements in which he took great pride was his part in the founding of the Barro Colorado Island Laboratory in the Canal Zone, and the fact that so many young men received their first thrilling glimpse of the tropics at Barro Colorado, that there Frank M. Chapman wrote 'My Tropical Air Castle,' and that some four hundred scientific papers were based on studies made there gave him a feeling of satisfaction that outweighed the pride of achievement.

Another project in which his influence was paramount and in which he took great pride was the Atkins Institution of the Arnold Arboretum at Soledád, near Cienfuegos, Cuba. This tropical botanical garden was the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin F. Atkins of Boston and contained upwards of 220 acres. A biological laboratory was built in 1924 and a dormitory in 1933. Tom was named Custodian in 1927, and the high spot of his winter trips to the Caribbean was his annual visit to Soledád. Like the Barro Colorado Laboratory, the Garden was a spot where young teachers could gather some first-hand knowledge of the tropics and Harvard fellowships for study there are granted to graduate students.

It may not be generally realized that he was one of the prime movers in establishing the Brewster Memorial award.

The first impression gained by anyone meeting Thomas Barbour for the first time was his great size (he was nearly 6 feet 6 inches and in his prime weighed close to 300 pounds). The next impression was his colorful and forceful manner of speech, but the third and deepest impression of all was made by his prodigious memory. Everything he ever learned was stored away in it. He was an inveterate reader of all manner of books of travel, scientific works, history, biography and adventure. His reading was effortless since he had a photographic

eye that instantly transmitted an entire page to his brain, where the information was filed permanently. He was never at a loss for an answer, could give the dates of any voyage of exploration, the name of the ship and the names of the naturalists, and the facts concerning the discovery of many species of animals. He was familiar with a great number of animals, never forgot their names or appearance, their distribution or relationships. Thus, while primarily a herpetologist, he was really one of the last of that vanishing race, the all-round naturalist.

Although possessed of a wonderful gift for brilliant and entertaining conversation, Tom was strongly averse to formal speaking; perhaps he felt that it "cramped his style." It was only on rare occasions that he could be prevailed upon to appear on the platform and then only for a brief address. In discussion from the floor, however, he was in his element.

As long as his health and travelling conditions permitted, Tom always made a trip to Central America and the West Indies every winter, primarily to inspect Barro Colorado and Soledád, but opportunities to get into out-of-the-way places to do a little collecting were by no means neglected at such times. During the late 1920's and early '30's these trips were made with the late Allison Armour on his yacht the "*Utowana*." In addition to Panamá and Cuba, the *Utowana* at one time or another touched at points on the west coast of México, Honduras, islands off the south coast of Hispaniola and various islands in the Bahamas.

In 1934, accompanied by Mrs. Barbour and his two youngest daughters, he made a journey to Africa, down the west coast, a visit to Kruger Park, up the east coast by freighter, with many stops and side trips, and finally home *via* Palestine and Gibraltar. In 1935 he went to Africa again with his family, primarily to visit the wild-life reserves in South Africa.

Shortly after he became Director he began the habit of eating his luncheon in his back office; for companionship he invited some of the other members of the staff to bring their lunches also. Next an electric stove, refrigerator and sink were installed and Robert Gilbert, William Brewster's old colored retainer, who came to the Museum after Mr. Brewster's death, was brought in to prepare the meals and to clean up afterwards. Thus the famous "Eateria" came into existence and many roast ducks and venison or elk steaks, the result of Tom's shooting excursions, were served to the guests. Up to the time that Gilbert died, early in 1942, the "Eateria" had served nearly 21,000 guests, including many visiting scientists from foreign countries.

His bibliography numbers some 375 titles covering a large variety of subjects. As with most prolific scientific authors, it would be almost impossible to compile a complete list of his writings, except that he did so himself, first in a privately printed brochure covering his publications from 1901-1939 and a second similar list including everything from 1939-1944.

During his later years, when poor health curtailed his travels and activities, he found much pleasure in writing of his life and experiences. A series of essays in the *'Atlantic Monthly'* was republished with additional chapters as *'A Naturalist at Large'* (Little, Brown & Co., 1943) which was a 'best seller.' This was followed by *'That Vanishing Eden'* (Little, Brown & Co., 1944), his personal account of Florida as he knew it from his first visit in 1898 to the present day, and which outsold *'A Naturalist at Large.'* Then came *'A Naturalist in Cuba'* (Little, Brown & Co., 1945) and lastly *'A Naturalist's Scrapbook'* (Harvard University Press, 1946) which appeared posthumously.

His list of memberships and honors is truly impressive. In addition to his Harvard scholastic degrees, he was awarded honorary Sc.D.'s from the University of Havana in 1930, Dartmouth in 1936, Harvard in 1939 and Florida in 1944. He was Lecturer, and later Professor of Zoology at Harvard since 1922; member of the Faculty of the Peabody Museum (Harvard) since 1913; Trustee, Radcliffe College 1930-1934; Trustee, Carnegie Institution, 1935; member of the Advisory Board, Guggenheim Foundation; Member of the National Academy of Sciences, Fellow American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Washington Academy of Sciences. Fellow, American Ornithologists' Union; Charter Member, American Society of Mammalogists; Past President of the Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists; President of the New England Zoölogical Club; President of the Boston Society of Natural History, 1925-1927 and 1940-1946; Member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, Biological Society of Washington, American Society of Zoölogists, American Philosophical Society, American Antiquarian Society, Massachusetts Historical Society, Society of Tropical Medicine; Fellow of the New York Zoological Society; Honorary Member, Zoological Society of Philadelphia; Corresponding Member, Hispanic Society of America; Fellow, Royal Geographic Society, London; Fellow, Royal Asiatic Society (Straits Branch); Foreign Member, Zoological Society of London; Corresponding Member, *Nederlandische Dierkundige Vereen*, Amsterdam; Honorary Fellow, *Academia de Ciencias Médicas Físicas y Naturales de la Habana*; Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the British Empire; Linnaean Society of London; and Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi fraternities.

His clubs included Somerset, Tavern and Harvard Clubs of Boston, Harvard Club of New York, Cosmos Club of Washington, Explorers and Boone and Crocket Clubs.

On January 8, 1946, he passed quietly away following a cerebral hemorrhage suffered two or three days previously. In his death the American Ornithologists' Union has lost a Fellow who was one of the world's most distinguished zoologists.

Museum of Comparative Zoölogy
Cambridge
Massachusetts.

TWENTY-THIRD SUPPLEMENT TO THE AMERICAN
ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION CHECK-LIST
OF NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS¹

In the course of preparation of the manuscript for the Fifth Edition of the A. O. U. Check-List, the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature has under continuous study proposals that involve addition or elimination of forms, and other suggested changes. The present supplement, covering cases to the end of 1947, as far as they have come to attention and have been decided, is published in accordance with instructions from the Council of the Union.

As work on the manuscript for the Fifth Edition has progressed it has been necessary to rewrite practically all the ranges, because of the considerable amount of new material now available. While this requires much more time, and imposes a far heavier task on the Committee than any of the members contemplated, it has been considered necessary to do this in order to produce a volume that will be of value.

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40. *Anser fabalis sibiricus* (Alpheraky). MIDDENDORFF'S BEAN GOOSE. [171.1a]
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¹ The Twenty-second Supplement was published in 'The Auk,' vol. 64, no. 3, July, 1947, pp. 445-452.