The boy from Missouri

Alan J. Charig

Digging into the Past: An Autobiography. By Edwin H. Colbert. *Dembner Books, New York: 1989. Pp. 456. Distributed by W.W. Norton, \$25.*

PERHAPS I am not an altogether suitable person to review Edwin Colbert's autobiography. As a vertebrate palaeontologist myself (indeed, his transatlantic 'opposite number') and a personal friend, I have revolved in many of the same circles as he; it is therefore only natural that I should show an exceptionally strong interest in the people, the places, the events and the subjects of which he writes. Nevertheless I cannot imagine that anyone could fail to be absorbed by this delightful book.

The author is a very ordinary man, in the best sense of that word. He has a wide diversity of interests and pleasures: dinosaurs, birds, Indians, travel, gardening, baseball, limericks — to name but a few. Modest and unpretentious, he sees himself as no different from anyone else. Yet, paradoxically, he is also quite extraordinary. In his chosen profession he has

reached the very summit, for he has been (simultaneously) a collector of vertebrate fossils from every continent, a senior curator of one of the world's leading natural history museums, and a researcher and prolific writer of scientific articles. His family life — first as son, then as husband and father of five boys, and more recently as grandfather — has likewise been remarkably happy. It is clear that Ned Colbert, both in his career and in his private life, has achieved fulfilment; such contentment, today, is a rare condition, and must surely be the greatest prize of all. If his book has a flaw, it is that its author looks at the world through rose-coloured spectacles; he sees

little fault in anyone (except the pompous, imperious Professor Osborn, self-appointed doyen of American vertebrate palaeontologists in the days of Colbert's youth). Indeed, nearly everybody and everything are "nice", which goes only to show how nice is the author himself.

Colbert has written many highly esteemed semi-popular scientific works. They are complemented by this new book, which is more personal, without too much of a technical nature; a palaeontological paragraph appears occasionally, but only to explain the broad divisions of geological time or of vertebrate life or, more often, the purpose of a particular visit or expedition. Rather, the book is an historical account of Colbert's own life, introducing *en passant* a series of cameos of people — mostly 'characters' — and things. Ned has a fantastic memory for detail; thus the house in which he spent his childhood in rural Missouri is lovingly described. Much of the detail is trivial, but it is always amusing. The cameos are inconsequential, not in any pejorative sense but in the sense that there is little connection between them (other than that of chronology). In each chapter, however, the individual items together build up, not just a picture of the author's own life, but also an impression of, say, life in a small mid-Western town in the first two decades of this century, or what it was like to be a member of the New York academic scene between the wars, or (more recently) of an expedition to Antarctica.

We begin with Colbert's birth in Iowa in 1905, his family history, the house in Maryville, Missouri, and his boyhood in that town, omitting neither his pranks nor his beloved dogs. His introduction to the world of nature and a brief interlude as a trainee forest ranger were followed by an awakening interest in palaeontology; that,

Colbert (right) on expedition in Antarctica in 1969.

in turn, led to an apprenticeship at the university museum in Lincoln (Nebraska) and then to Columbia University in New York. Columbia had close links with the American Museum of Natural History, and it was at those two institutions — especially the latter — that Colbert spent the greater part of his professional life. From then on we are treated to an entertaining and informative account of his career. He describes at length the places he travelled to and worked in, both in the United States and abroad; the people he met (most of them amusingly eccentric); and, less frequently, the fossils he dug up. The book ends with a chapter on museums, another on dinosaurs, and the last on his retirement years, spent with his wife Margaret in the beautiful surroundings of Flagstaff, Arizona. Their house, of course, is next door to the local museum, where Ned still spends much of his time.

Each of the 22 chapters is prefaced by a charming black-and-white drawing by his wife, appropriate to the title of that chapter — be it a somewhat apprehensive young Colbert sliding down the hillside on his sled, or a Triassic gliding lizard, or a gulch on the edge of a Brazilian village. There are also 32 pages of black-and-white photographs, and an excellent index.

Ned Colbert wrote in his obituary of Alfred Romer (a slightly older, equally famous, equally lovable American colleague) that "he took his paleontology seriously but never himself". Colbert's autobiography shows that this compliment is just as true of himself. □

Until his retirement Alan J. Charig was Chief Curator of Fossil Amphibians, Reptiles and Birds at the British Museum (Natural History), Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD, UK, where he is now a Research Associate.

Introducing the first in a landmark series of
Scientific American
Readers

The Science of AIDS

A *Scientific American* Reader

Assembled from the October 1988 single-topic issue of *Scientific American* — 'What Science Knows About AIDS' — this new reader features the first collaborative effort of Robert C. Gallo and Luc Montagnier, the discoverers of HIV, who survey key areas of current research and reveal how HIV was isolated and linked to AIDS.

May 1989 135 pages
65 illustrations paper £7.95

The Science of AIDS is the first of an exciting new series of *Scientific American* Readers being produced by W H Freeman.

For further information please contact us at:
Reader Service No. 17

W H Freeman

The book publishing arm of *Scientific American*
20 Beaumont Street, Oxford OX1 2NQ