A life on the wild side

J. L. Cloudsley-Thompson

Naturalist. By Edward O. Wilson. *Island/Shearwater Books: 1994. $24.95.*

IT is difficult to read an autobiography without inwardly questioning the motives of its author. Is the writer driven primarily by a desire to share with others who are perhaps less talented, less energetic or less extrovert the experiences, thrills and rewards of a successful career, or is the exercise merely what in the 1960s was known as an ego-trip? No doubt many factors are involved, and it is probably impossible to write of oneself without being to some extent egocentric.

Somewhat less restrained than most, Edward Wilson's autobiography contains plenty of elements from both these two extremes. As one of the leading field biologists of the present century, he is, however, entitled to a certain degree of self-esteem. Moreover, he does not indulge in name dropping or, rather, the names he drops are mainly those of other well known zoologists — not of the aristocracy, nor of the politicians, film actors and other celebrities who feature so largely in many personal narratives, At the same time, his fascination with living organisms is unquestionably sincere: his book should provide inspiration to youthful biologists whose bent is towards natural history rather than the more fashionable microbiology or mathematical ecology. He is also generous with his praise of others and by no means uncritical of himself. He states frankly that he is a poor mathematician, but has "an unusual ability to make comparisons of disparate objects, thus to produce syntheses of previously unconnected information". He certainly justifies his claims to write "smoothly" and, throughout his career, to have "pushed" his considerable strengths and "skirted" his weaknesses.

Wilson does not lack courage: witness his account of a reckless youthful attempt to capture an outsize cottonmouth moccasin, nearly as long as himself, in a swamp on the Alabama border with Florida, north of Pensacola. He had previously been bitten by a pygmy rattlesnake, so he knew what to expect — and he had also earned the "Scout merit badge for Reptile Life". He became an entomologist rather than a herpetologist because, while fishing for minnows at an early age, one of the dorsal spines of a pinfish accidentally pierced the pupil of his right eye when he "yanked" his line too hard. The lens subsequently clouded over and had to be removed. He was held down while the "anesthesiologist, a woman named Pearl Murphy, placed a gauze nose cone over my nose and mouth and dripped ether into it". For years afterwards he became nauseous at the smell of ether.

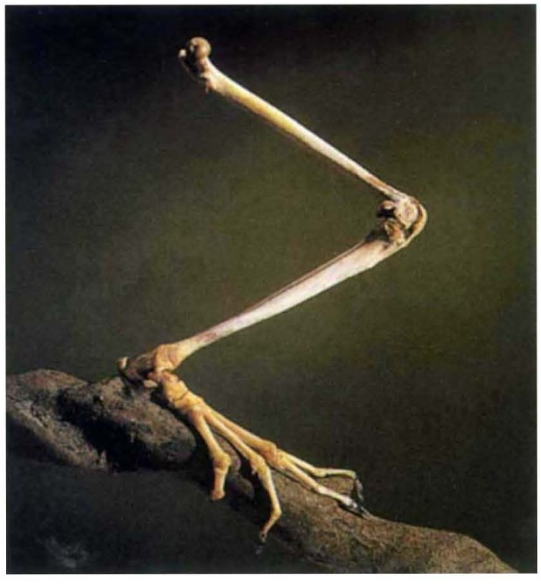
Every facet of an adventurous youth in the 'Old South' is recalled with striking clarity: the personal details of a broken home, his rapid advancement to "Eagle Scout with palm clusters, the highest rank", his experiences as a cadet in the US Reserve Officers' Training Corps, a technique for catching flies by hand, his unrealistic athletic ambitions and his determination to excel, despite any natural handicaps. He compares himself with a friend who won the over-40 laurels in the 1980 Boston Marathon in the following words: "He was Mozart to my envious Salieri". Above all, the reader will be impressed both by his competitiveness and by his insatiable curiosity. It is well said that the most important ingredient of scientific research is to ask the right questions: Wilson constructs elaborate syn-theses and comes up with fresh unifying concepts.

For British readers, one of the most intriguing aspects of the early chapters of this unusual book may lie in the differences in attitudes and conventions between boys in the United States and in the United Kingdom. Whereas in the United Kingdom it was not considered 'good form' half a century ago to indulge in fist fights — even in preparatory school — in the more brash Gulf Coast Military Academy it was deemed unmanly to refuse a fight. As the narrative unfolds, with its detailed self-analysis, the reader is given a fascinating insight into the mental development and maturation of a distinguished zoologist as well as of the evolution of the field of study that he helped to define.

Biologists will probably find the second section of the book, "Storyteller", even more interesting than the first, "Daybreak in Alabama". In it, Wilson takes his readers on travels throughout the South Pacific, Australia and New Guinea. His unsuccessful search for the most primitive known ant, *Nothomyrmecia macrops*, makes a good story, as does the account of his chance discovery, in Sri Lanka, of *Aneuretus simoni,* which apparently links the Myrmicinae and the Dolichorderinae. In a chapter aptly named "The Molecular Wars", Wilson describes his clashes with James Watson who, "having risen to historic fame at an early age, became the Caligula of biology", and we are given the low-down on how Harvard University makes offers of tenure to its faculty. The pace quickens as conceptual discoveries such as character displacement and sociobiology are developed, while the final chapter is devoted to concern about the global loss of biodiversity. I found the controversy over sociobiology, especially the part played by Richard Lewontin, quite extraordinary.

This account of Wilson's life provides detailed insights into the creation of a renowned scientist, and is an elegant account of the development of his exciting ideas. It is illustrated by numerous photographs of the author, mostly while receiving well-earned medals, awards and prizes, and lively drawings by Laura S. Southworth. □

J. L. Cloudsley-Thompson is at 10 Battishill Street, London N1 1TE, UK. He is emeritus professor of zoology at the University of London and former professor of zoology at the University of Khartoum and keeper of the Sudan Natural History Museum.



SKELETON of the hindleg of a white-throated capuchin monkey (*Cebus capuchinus*). The leg joints allow the foot to be placed in different positions and at different angles. Picture taken from *Bones: The Unity of Form and Function* with text by R. McNeill Alexander and photography by Brian Kosoff. A beautiful blend of art and science. Weidenfeld and Nicholson/Macmillan, £19.99, $40.