

Contributions to the History of Herpetology Volume 1

Revised and Expanded Edition

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The First World Congress of Herpetology at the University of Kent in 1989 was associated with a number of “firsts”. One of them was the publication of volume 1 of this work, destined eventually to have two further volumes added. Together they are a compendium of short (mostly 3-400 word) biographies of almost all of the world’s major herpetologists up to the

1960s. There had been nothing like these books before, and there has been nothing like them since - they are unique. The selection of which volume an individual should appear in appears to have been made on the basis of providing a balanced coverage. This one starts with Conrad Gessner (the early authors included were not herpetologists - the word hadn’t been coined then - but zoologists whose works contained a significant element of descriptions of reptiles and amphibians: Gessner is famous for *Historia*

Animalium in five volumes published between 1551 and 1587). It finishes, just over 150 accounts later, with Avelino Barrio.

Of most interest to British readers, probably, will be the accounts of the lives and work of George Boulenger and Malcolm Smith, who between them, in very different ways, dominated the English herpetological scene between 1882 and 1958. Other well-known British herpetologists, Angus Bellairs and Garth Underwood, for example, appear in other volumes.

Sometimes, when I look at a book on - say - Old Testament textual analysis or the archaeology of Dartmoor, I am overwhelmed by the thought that anyone can have so much detailed knowledge about such a small segment of endeavour. I had the same feeling looking at this volume. I rather doubt that anyone would ever sit down to read it from cover to cover. But as a work of historical reference, it’s invaluable. I think it’s likely to remain the definitive work of its kind for many years to come.

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