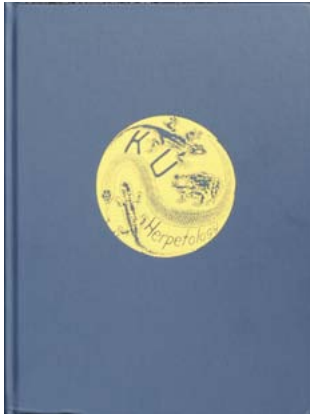


Herpetology at Kansas: A Centennial History

William E. Duellman (2015)

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Those of us who live in the Old World often look rather condescendingly at our cousins in the New – we tend to assume, for example, that our institutions must all be much older than theirs. It comes as a surprise, therefore, to discover that the University of Kansas (KU) was founded in 1866, before most British “redbrick” universities had received their charters and almost a century before the

modern “plate glass and lavatory tile” genre had even been thought of. By 1901, KU had embarked on building a large, ornate Museum of Natural History. The collections quickly came to include amphibians and reptiles. It wasn’t until 1926, however, when Edward Taylor – who had made extensive herpetological collections in the Philippines and elsewhere – was appointed to the Faculty, that “herpetology at Kansas” might be considered to have been born.

This 346-page book was written by William Duellman, who was appointed Assistant Curator of Herpetology in 1959. He retired in 1997, having become (with Linda Trueb) the foremost authority on the amphibians of Central and South America, built up one of the biggest graduate programmes in herpetology in the world, and overseen the growth of the herpetological collection to nearly 300,000 specimens. The book was published to coincide with the 58th meeting of SSAR, held at KU in 2015, but it isn’t clear to me what the centenary was.

My first impression of this book was “this tells me more about the University of Kansas than I want to know”. But, although it’s a bit factual and – dare I say it – dull in places, a fascinating story emerges. As so often with successful human

endeavours, much hinged on the personalities of highly-motivated people. Sometimes they worked together in very productive ways – I lost count of the number of expeditions to South America and elsewhere mounted by staff and associates of the Museum. Sometimes they clashed: it was ever thus.

The volume is number 31 in the Contributions to Herpetology published by the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles. Like all the books in the series, it is beautifully produced, copiously illustrated with black-and-white photographs, has been edited with great skill and, so far as I can tell, is commendably free from errors and typographical mistakes.

So, a tour de force which is unique. I wrote that over-employed and often misused word advisedly – I don’t know anything which gives so much detail about the history of one institution in the annals of herpetology. It will stand as a monument, for many years to come, to the endeavours of a talented and devoted body of workers who built up an amazing organisation in what seems – condescension again – an unlikely place. This is a group of people who have made a seminal contribution to tropical herpetology. And as the book makes clear, they had a lot of fun doing so. Their parties were legendary, and many of the “big names” of academic herpetology were there. Gosh, how I wish that I could have been there too...

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