

## B I O G R A P H I C A L   S K E T C H

### Thomas Barbour (1884–1946)<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Barbour was born to a wealthy family on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts in 1884. Much of his inheritance was applied to his chosen life's work, which, after a winter in Florida and the Bahamas recuperating from typhoid fever, focused largely on reptiles, the tropics, and island faunas.

Growing up in New York, he built a collection of preserved reptiles, largely composed of specimens saved for him by the zoo. The donation of this collection was his entrée to the Museum of Comparative Zoology when he entered Harvard College as a student. Barbour graduated in 1906, continued for graduate study (A.M. 1908, Ph.D. 1911), and, while still a graduate student, took over responsibility for the museum's collection of amphibians and reptiles in 1910.

After completion of his doctorate, Barbour became Associate Curator of Reptiles and Amphibians. Until the early 1920s, when he gave up curatorial responsibilities, he tripled the number of species. Much of the growth is attributed to his own collecting throughout the world, but much was the result of an aggressive exchange program with other institutions and purchases out of his own pocket.

In 1923, Barbour became the executive officer charged with the development of Barro Colorado Island, formerly a forested hill that became an island when Gatun Lake was formed during construction of the Panama Canal. Barbour recognized the site's potential for research, personally bought out the banana growers, hired the first superintendent, and supervised the construction of the first building on the site, which now serves as the Smithsonian



Thomas Barbour (photograph courtesy of Kraig Adler).

Tropical Research Institute. Barbour continued as executive director until 1945.

Barbour also developed the domestic production of snake antivenin. In 1926, he, Raymond Ditmars (see the biographical sketch in *Iguana* 10(3):92), and other North Americans, advised by Afrânio do Amaral, founded the Antivenin Institute of America. The organization, which included a venom-collecting serpentarium in Honduras and an antivenin-producing laboratory in Pennsylvania, also published a journal (*Bulletin of the Antivenin Institute of America*) from 1927–1932, which Barbour funded and co-edited. He also supported the journal of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists (*Copeia*) by covering its operating deficits for many years.

In 1927, Barbour became Director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology and continued in that position for the rest of his life. He liberally supported museum projects and never drew a salary. Several noted herpetologists (e.g., Archie Carr, Emmett Dunn, and G. Kingsley Noble) began their careers under his guidance and benefited from his support.

Despite his influence on American herpetology, his own research was rather diffuse and sometimes superficial (see also Henderson and Powell. 2005. Thomas Barbour and the Utowana expeditions (1929–1934) in the West Indies. *Bonner Zoologische Beiträge* 52:297–309). His first two monographs (1912 and 1914) covered the amphibians and reptiles of the East and West Indies, respectively. The largest fraction of his more than 200 subsequent herpetological titles also addressed the West Indian herpetofaunas, continuing a tradition of Harvard herpetologists that began with Samuel Garman in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and continues to this day.

Major herpetological works included five editions of checklists of North American amphibians and reptiles (1917–1943, with Leonhard Stejneger), "Herpetology of Cuba" (1919, with Charles Ramsden), "*Sphaerodactylus*" (1921), "Antillean Terrapins" (1940, with Archie Carr), and a semi-popular book entitled *Reptiles and Amphibians and Their Adaptations* (1929, revised in 1943).

Despite his formal training, many accomplishments, and numerous honors, Barbour was in many ways more of a wealthy amateur than serious professional. In *Naturalist at Large* (1943), one of four autobiographical books completed shortly before his death in 1946, he provided a glimpse into his complex life (p. 45).

<sup>1</sup> Source: Adler, K. 1989. Herpetologists of the past, pp. 5–141. In K. Adler (ed.), *Contributions to the History of Herpetology*. Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles, Contributions to Herpetology, Number 5. Ithaca, New York.