

Allison Armour and the Utowana¹

Thomas Barbour

Visits to Saba, St. Kitts, Nevis, Antigua, Guadeloupe, Marie Galante, Dominica, St. Lucia, Barbados, St. Vincent, Cariacou, Grenada, Tabago [*sic*], Trinidad, followed, then La Guaira and Puerto Cabello in Venezuela, Curacao, Santa Marta, and Cartagena [*sic*] in Colombia, Colon in the Canal Zone, Port Limon in Costa Rica, Tela, Honduras, and Cienfuegos, Cuba, where we fetched up on the 15th of April. The collections from the West Indies in the Museum of Comparative Zoology are extraordinarily rich and varied, so that in many localities there was nothing especially for me to do but to see the sights. This always gave me the greatest possible enjoyment. Next to vigorous collecting in a new locality, nothing is so interesting to the naturalist as the opportunity to see those places from which he has studied material gathered by other collectors. That was the case with all these islands in the Lesser Antilles, which I myself had never visited before.

From Beata Island,² however, we had no material whatsoever in the Agassiz Museum so that everything which we got there was new to us, and we made a fine haul, too, all pure gold. This is one of those islands where one of those great and strange looking rhinoceros iguanas³ once abounded. The big, bulky lizards crept about the high limestone hills not far inland from the beach. Harmless and inoffensive nevertheless they look like

fearsome dinosaurs on a miniature scale. Each about three feet long and weighing perhaps fifteen or more pounds they walk slowly about browsing on buds and leaves and before scuttling away with surprising alacrity when they are approached, they first stare at the intruder and bob their heads up and down in a singularly truculent way. This might be a bit disconcerting to one unfamiliar with the ways of lizards in general and iguanas in particular. We preserved several. I am glad we did, for observations made during this visit, and subsequent ones as well, forced the conclusion that they belong to a doomed race.⁴ No young individuals were to be found and tracks in the sand showed that feral cats, escaped from the abandoned camps of fishermen, who go to Beata to dry fish or catch turtles, were responsible. I may add that the fishing off the west coast of the island near our anchorage was splendid.

¹ Excerpted from Barbour, T. 1945. *Allison Armour and the Utowana*. Priv. Published, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

² Off the southern tip of the Barahona Peninsula of Hispaniola.

³ *Cyclura cornuta*.

⁴ The population on Beata is extant and doing well, despite Barbour's pessimistic assessment.



Barbour's conclusion that the Rhinoceros Iguana population on Isla Beata was a "doomed race" was premature. *Photograph by John Binns.*

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

Thomas Barbour (1884–1946)¹

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 19th 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).

¹ 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.