

# Under the shell

VIRGINIA SMITH

Peter C. H. Pritchard

TALES FROM THE THÉBAÏDE

Reflections of a turtleman

340pp. Melbourne, FL: Robert E. Krieger. \$44.50.

978 1 57524 277 4

Pritchard emigrated to Florida to study under Carr. They had plenty in common, being well-born and writerly. Both began their careers as scholars of turtles and emerged poets of turtles – Carr in a direct, folksy style; Pritchard in a droll, starchy one. Over their two decades' friendship, Pritchard observed

age: "As one gets older, thoughts of one's own mortality start to intrude, and one may hesitate to hasten other beings to their deaths".

Pritchard knows the feeling. He continues to manage a sea-turtle conservation program he founded in Guyana but, with sea-turtle science now a well-funded and high-tech affair, his attentions lean toward the tortoises and freshwater turtles that might die out any day. There are many of these to choose from, but Pritchard's favourites are a mammoth softshell that swims alone in a Hanoi park pond, the last of its species in anything resembling the wild, and Lonesome George, the sole survivor of a race of Galápagos tortoise.



Giant tortoises on Alcedo Volcano, Isla Isabela, in the Galapagos Islands

Science's finest collection of turtles occupies a two-storey house, a storage shack, and some thatched huts in an old orange grove. The property, in a rural periphery of Orlando, Florida, belongs to Peter C. H. Pritchard, who a decade ago christened it the Chelonian Research Institute. Pritchard, a scientist known for his work with sea turtles and the giant tortoises of Galápagos, had never taught a college class, nor affixed himself to a major museum. Instead, he made his name through grants, collaborations and his own writings, which used to bear matter-of-fact titles like "Encyclopedia of Turtles", but in recent years have taken a contemplative turn. His Institute harks back less to the nineteenth century – for by then natural history museums were already going big and public – than to the eighteenth, when nobles lovingly tended collections on a favourite theme. Pritchard's turtle collection boasts some 12,000 specimens and counting (compared to, say, the British Museum's 4,000), representing all the living species plus some fossils.

Why indeed does one accrue 12,000 specimens of turtle, in jars, in boxes, labelled in minute script? "I have taken to giving increasingly rambling and philosophical answers to the eternal question of 'why turtles'", writes Pritchard in *Tales from the Thébaïde: Reflections of a turtleman*. This is a collection of essays that combine science, memoir and a defence of the author's private museum. Pritchard laments from the start that his mentor, Archie Carr, was more succinct on the turtle question. Carr, the scientist and writer who first popularized the plight of sea turtles in the 1950s, "was quite frank about his emotional attachment to his creatures when questioned by a newspaper reporter a month before he died in 1987: I just liked the looks of their faces, he replied".

In 1964, Pritchard, a chemistry student at Oxford, was on summer vacation in British Guiana (now Guyana), a guest of its Govern-

ment moved slowly, as if visiting a bedridden centenarian friend. There before us, relaxed with his long neck draped on the lava, was George, the most famous tortoise in the world. I knew him well. For more than three decades he had been in exile from Pinta, the island of his birth, and was spending his days and years at the Darwin Station. He had changed somewhat since I first saw him in 1972; having been a sprightly young adult of perhaps 30 then, he was now a middle-aged 60 or so, the same as myself. His shell was smoother now, without the textured growth lines of his youth; his gait slower and more creaky; his "Quasimodo hump" was somewhat more pronounced, and he had put on a little weight. Apart from the smooth shell and (dare I flatter myself?) the hump, I could empathize with all these changes. I hope he has many more years ahead, because as far as we and anyone else have been able to tell, he is absolutely the last of his kind, waiting for extinction.

When Pritchard addresses the reader directly, as in the Pinta chapter and others equally well realized, the effects make it worth the slog through even his bone-by-bone descriptions of specimens and occasionally indulgent wordplay ("borborygmatic eructations", "institutional floccinaucinihilipilification"). Unfortunately, some of these chapters are speeches, rebuttals to fellow scientists' polemics, and eulogies, reprinted without much alteration. A reader might rather not know, for example, that a chapter about conservation's greatest dilemmas originated as an address to the Soka Gakkai Buddhists of central Florida. Other chapters have nothing to do with turtles but are vignettes of Pritchard's well-lived life (recollections of boarding-school headmasters, dowager aunts, Oxford expeditions to Persia, etc). These are agreeable enough detours *en route* to a pointed and rewarding conclusion.

In a chapter called "The Chelonian Research Institute", written with the force of a manifesto, Pritchard introduces a line-up of natural history's acquisitive eccentrics



nor, when he discovered the skulls of some olive ridley turtles on an isolated northern beach. The skulls offered evidence that the species nested there; until then, their nesting grounds were a mystery that Carr had chewed over in his book *The Windward Road* (1957). Pritchard sent him a letter. Soon afterwards,

the progress of Carr's "emotional attachment to his creatures" with wonder. Once an eater of sea-turtle meat and proponent of sea-turtle farming as a conservation measure, Carr found he could not abide their killing for any reason, and broke off relationships with those who felt otherwise. Pritchard chalks it up to

In 2003, under the Institute's banner, Pritchard led an expedition to Pinta Island in the Galápagos, where whalers had loaded so many giant tortoises onto their ships for food that, after the mid-nineteenth century, no more than six were ever seen there alive. By 1972, only one male remained. Pritchard met Lonesome George on Pinta then, and witnessed his removal to safety on another island, but after later reports of a fresh-looking skeleton and a piece of tortoise dung on Pinta, it nagged him that there might still be more. The story of this expedition, and its painful conclusion, make for one of this book's standout chapters, which beckons like a Frommer's guide to the impassible Pinta:

If you wander inland and uphill through the lava-strewn cactus deserts for a few kilometers, and into the lichen-festooned palo santo forests, and finally come to rest under one of the few good shade trees, the loudest sounds will be your own breathing and heartbeat. The land is silent as the grave. Yet pause a while, and finches and flycatchers will land a few feet away, then hop on to your foot or knee, head cocked to one side as they evaluate the bizarre visitor from all angles; bird-watching in reverse. A lava lizard, of a species found nowhere else in the world, has settled down to catch the flies attracted by your sweat.

The journey ends in a face-to-face with George:

We spoke very quietly and respectfully, and

natural history's acquisitive eccentrics (Pritchard, who drives to the Wal-Mart in a 1957 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, might consider himself among them). Without their private collections, the products of wealth and passion and a sometimes scary single-mindedness, he argues, modern museums would have little to build on. Walter Rothschild's bird collection became the American Museum of Natural History's; a dentist's turtle collection formed the nucleus of Oxford University's; recently an obsessive Minnesota couple donated their 30,000 butterflies, plus \$12 million, for a smart new Lepidoptera centre at the University of Florida.

Pritchard hopes his Institute will survive him more or less as it is, quirks intact. Currently, visiting researchers bunk upstairs when they need to, and borrow specimens without much paperwork or fuss. More remarkably, and this is a real departure from standard museum policy, Pritchard accepts only specimens that are already dead. This has cost his little "thébaïde" some big grants in recent years. In his final chapter, likely conceived as a retort to the US National Science Foundation, he lists about a dozen reasons why killing specimens is less necessary and more wasteful than the old guard thinks. "I personally regard the killing of a tortoise in hand as the moral equivalent of fatally beating someone in a wheelchair", Peter Pritchard writes. Why turtles? He likes the looks of their faces.

# Have you missed an issue?

To order past copies please call 0207 740 0217, email [tls@ocsmmedia.net](mailto:tls@ocsmmedia.net) or write to: TLS Back Issues, 1-11 Galleywall Road, London, SE16 3PB, enclosing a cheque made payable to OCS Worldwide. Credit/debit card payments are also accepted. Back issues cost £3.50 per copy within the UK and £5.00 overseas (please note that not all issues are available). Please state the date of each issue required.

An index of all past issues is available at [www.ocsmmedia.net/tls](http://www.ocsmmedia.net/tls)

