

## Emmett Reid Dunn

1894-1956

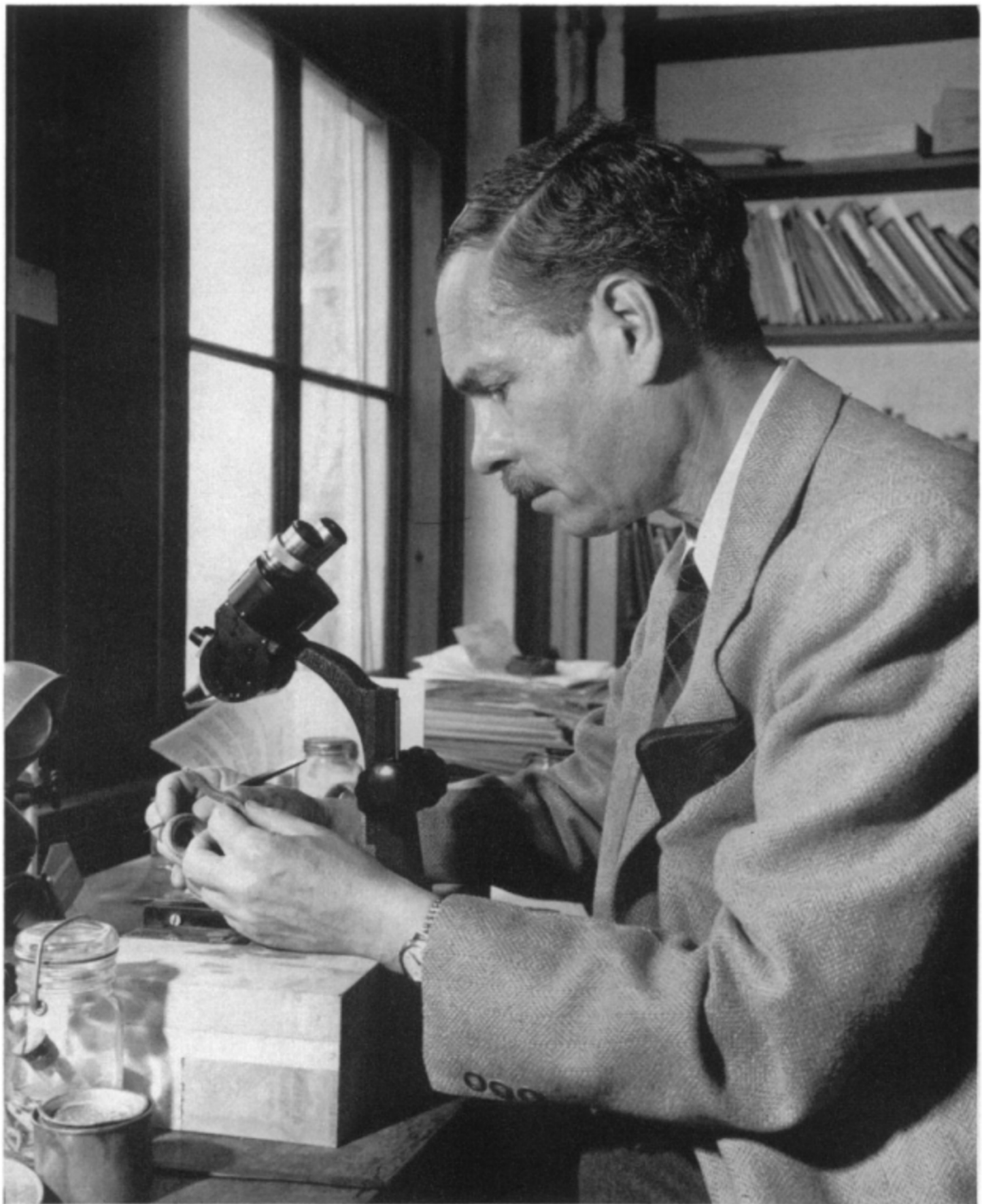
EMMETT REID DUNN was a dedicated herpetologist who brought breadth of biological view as well as intensity of interest to his chosen field. He could thus take a major share with the colleagues of his own generation in the transformation of herpetology from its mainly descriptive past to its more interpretive and critical present. Even his first paper, in 1915, a study of the variation in a brood of water snakes, pointed in the direction of understanding the phenomena examined. In his subsequent career, on a basis of sound descriptive surveys of the families of salamanders, he became anatomist, ecologist, and zoogeographer, with original and incisive ideas in each field. Of all our group born in the decade of the nineties, he reminds me most of Edward Drinker Cope. E. R. D., or Dixie, or Hecho, as he was affectionately known to various intimates, had a mind intensely focussed on herpetology; a conversation with him might discuss amphibians and reptiles and questions about them for hours on end. From his first studies he became a field naturalist, and wide travels and the love of far places infused interest into his teaching and gave him prestige among students and colleagues.

As his description of a new peripatus from Panama is surprising departure from herpetology, so his East Indian expedition to collect the Komodo monitor for the American Museum stands out in a career of travel mainly in the Caribbean region. His earliest collecting trips were to the Appalachian Mountains, so rich in the salamanders he wished to study. As the plan for a systematic review of the *Salamanders of the family Plethodontidae* took shape, the problems posed by the sole tropical genus, *Oedipus* (in its broad sense), took him to the Mexican escarpment and to Costa Rica and Panama. He returned again and again to these latter countries, until he became the outstanding authority on the reptiles and amphibians of lower Central America. His long consecutive stay in Colombia falls naturally into the pattern of these interests. The results of his studies

were embodied in papers on the composition of the herpetological fauna of Panama, critical reviews of various snake genera, and the useful summary of the Colombian amphibians and reptiles in *Caldasia* (Bogotá).

Dunn's first mentor in herpetology was Leonard Stejneger at the National Museum. His second was Henry Sherring Pratt, his teacher at Haverford; and the influence of both was soon overshadowed by that of the commanding personality of Thomas Barbour, who was to be teacher, patron, and friend. The patroness of the first of Emmett Dunn's expeditions, to the North Carolina mountains, was Mary Cynthia Dickerson. I chanced to make my own first visit to the American Museum on the June day in 1916 when plans for that expedition were being discussed, and Miss Dickerson took us to lunch together in the old Mitla Restaurant. The congenial contact established on that day was to become a forty-year friendship, in which our two careers were sometimes crucially interwoven.

The young student's first teaching position out of college (B.S. 1915, M.A. 1916, at Haverford) was at Smith College, where he began as Assistant in Zoology, advancing by 1929 to Associate Professor. The curious course of this young naturalist's war service in 1917-1918 illustrates his complete dedication to his future interests. He was failed for a commission in the army, from officer's training school, entirely on the ground that his week-end pursuit of snakes and salamanders was conduct unbecoming to an officer candidate. Fortunately, the navy was free from such prejudice against natural history, and he received his commission as ensign, U.S.N., in 1917. On his return to Smith College, in addition to a stimulating friendship with the late H. M. Parshley, he was thrown into contact with two of the principal American students of salamanders, Dr. and Mrs. Harris Hawthorne Wilder. The remarkable and significant feature of lunglessness in the plethodontid salamanders had been pointed out by Professor Wilder in 1894, the year Emmett Dunn was born. Thus



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the intellectual atmosphere at Smith was eminently favorable for salamander studies. Graduate work at Harvard next brought him into contact with Thomas Barbour at the Museum of Comparative Zoology. "TB", and the museum, financed much of his earlier field work, and it was natural that he should follow Barbour in the Caribbean field of interest, especially in Cuba and Panama.

On the faculty at Smith College Emmett Dunn found a congenial helpmate in Alta Merle Taylor. Together they made a hospitable and distinguished home when he transferred from Smith to Haverford; and together they made an effective team on all of the expeditions subsequent to their marriage in 1930. In 1934 Dixie Dunn succeeded Professor Pratt in the David Scull Professorship of Biology at Haverford. There, in the vicinity of Philadelphia, he naturally became Honorary Curator of Reptiles at the historically important Academy of Natural Sciences. Dixie and Merle Dunn interested themselves with some success in the attempt to bring order into the chaos into which the Cope collections had fallen through thirty years of inexcusable neglect. The Haverford teaching career was a distinguished one. The list of professional biologists and especially herpetologists who began their careers as Dunn's students is too long for this essay.

A John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, in 1928, coming at a fortunately early stage in his career, had enabled him to study salamanders and caecilians at the museums in London, Paris, and Berlin. The absorbing interest in caecilians was shared, not without rivalry, with G. K. Noble, of the American Museum, and an agreement dividing the group, with the Old World forms for Dr. Noble and the New World ones for Dunn led to the completion of an important review of the American forms in 1942. Continuing interest in this group occupied much of his attention in later years, and the discovery, jointly with H. W. Parker, of astonishing features in the mode of reproduction of the viviparous forms became a crowning achievement, to be reported, after the long delay caused by Dixie's last illness, by Dr. Parker.

Among the herpetologists of his generation, his was the happiest literary gift. He practiced it as the second editor of *Copeia* (1924 to 1929). My greatest regret at his too early death is that his sensitivity to the excitement and romance

of our profession could not be embodied in writings especially about his travels. He could have added distinguished volumes to the important class of "books of travel by naturalists." I well remember, when I was called upon to lecture on salamanders to a quite laboratory-minded student group at the University of Chicago, reading to them the opening words of his preface in his salamander volume:

Much water has flowed under many bridges since the January of the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and thirteen, when a college Sophomore opened a letter and read a sentence, the results whereof are the following pages. It has been thirteen years since the eighteen-year-old boy read those few words and in those thirteen years for him the surf has whitened the shores of Caribbean islands; the slopes of the Balsams have been blue in the distance; hawks have soared a thousand feet below the naked peak of Sharp Rock; the iridescent wings of Morpho have fluttered through glades in the rain forest and in the mist of the cataract at Xico; from the mooring at Vera Cruz tall Orizaba has stood against the western sky; the low sun has shone on the ice of Ixtaccihuatl, most unforgettable of mountains; step after step, for him, far out at sea, Chirripo Grande, "nie von Menschenfuss betreten," has climbed aloft; and from shaken Irazu, while the ash cloud of the eruption rose above his head and floated a black pall beaten by the fierce wind, he has seen through a break in the clouds, far to the Southwards, the sheer and menacing shaft of rock which is Cerro de la Muerte.

And in that letter and in that sentence there was no hint of high peaks or of distant places, of mountains seen and unclimbed and forever remembered, of the coughing of tigers by night in the black forest, there were only these words in that letter from Leonhard Stejneger "I would like to point out to you, however, that Herpetology offers fields more in need of investigation than the snakes, viz., the salamanders."

Bald and prosaic words these, true though they were. Bald and prosaic has much of the work been, and, for those who venture further in what lies hereinafter, there is aridity and to spare. This is deplorable enough, but unavoidable, and while the written accounts of genera and of species unquestionably make dull reading, and were, it must be confessed, dull writing, yet the taking of specimens and the gathering of data and all that went therewith, and the remembrance thereof, has more than outweighed the dullness.

My hearers in the classroom almost held their breath. It was as if, for the first time for some, a curtain had been drawn aside to reveal the vast and grand landscape in which the naturalist moves and has his being. I have quoted at length because this preface tells something more about Emmett Reid Dunn than can the words of others.

The early interest of the young Dunn in natural history in general and in snakes and

salamanders in particular was a shock to the somewhat patrician Dunn and Reid families of Alexandria. They took it well, and must have been relieved to find the young naturalist welcomed and encouraged by Leonhard Stejneger at the National Museum just across the Potomac. The circumstance that his maternal uncle Legh Reid, the distinguished mathematician, taught at Haverford College, governed the choice of college. It proved a fortunate choice for both beginning and end of his career. Those careers are most fortunate in which nurture reinforces the drives of nature. Emmett Reid

Dunn presents a happy example of education and inspiration combining with active interest into an intimate concordance of profession and personality. The life of scholarship brings distinguished rewards. The life of a teacher, naturalist, traveller and scholar, like that of Emmett Reid Dunn, seems to me to be the richest and most rewarding of all careers. Let us therefore write not only farewell, to our friend, but hail to our colleague's enrichment of our science. KARL P. SCHMIDT, CURATOR OF ZOOLOGY EMERITUS, CHICAGO NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM.