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A NATURALIST
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BY
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PREFACE

During recent troublous years I have found much comfort in re-reading my diaries written long ago in the Gran Chaco and thereby escaping for the time being into what seemed a different world. I am not without hope that others too may find such comfort even though of lesser degree in the perusal of the excerpts from my Chaco diaries printed in this volume.

Their main appeal will of course be to naturalists who will find therein recorded many observations which though made long ago have not hitherto been published. In Part II dealing with the South American lungfish, that strange link between water-breathing fish and air-breathing land animals, they will find a short account of my endeavour to reach what I regard as the ideal of the scientific naturalist—the preliminary study of the living animal in its natural environment, followed by the more precise and intensive investigations of the laboratory—in other words the intimate linking together of field natural history and laboratory research.

The student of sociology or anthropology will be more particularly interested in my picture of the Natokoi or Toba Indians of the Pilcomayo, who, isolated to a great extent from outside influences through being surrounded by hostile tribes, had managed to linger on in what must be regarded as an extraordinarily primitive stage of communal evolution. The accuracy of my picture has been greatly enhanced by two factors: (1) the common interest we had as observers and hunters of wild animals, and (2) the fact that I was not among them in order to dispose of my own wares—material or spiritual. The trader and the missionary alike are apt to be prevented from getting into the most intimate contact with primitive peoples by an impenetrable barrier of suspicion. They are apt to be hampered too by preconceived ideas—religious, scientific or what not—which tend to mislead both in matters of observation and in the interpretation of what is observed.

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PREFACE

In considering the make-up of this volume I have decided, after due consideration,

(1) to make no attempt to provide detailed maps: Chaco surveys are hampered by the impermanence of the only available landmarks such as the courses of rivers and the boundaries of swamp and forest;

(2) as regards nomenclature to use as a rule the scientific names of animals and plants in vogue at the date of my expedition; and

(3) in the matter of spelling Spanish words to follow South American custom, e.g. Bermejo, Biscacha, Vaqueano rather than Vermejo, Viscacha, Baqueano.

I have to make grateful acknowledgment of assistance given by many friends and colleagues regarding various matters of detail: Mr R. H. Tottenham, H.B.M. Chargé d'Affaires at Asunción; the Directors of the British Museum (Natural History), the La Plata Museum, the Buenos Aires Museum of Natural Sciences, Messrs D. A. Bannerman, R. B. Benson, Max Birabín, W. S. Bristowe, H. A. Gleason, M. Hinton, A. J. Montague, of the British Council, and H. F. Schwarz, of the American Museum of Natural History.

My comrades on the Pilcomayo Expedition, Messrs Andrew Pride and R. J. Hunt of the South American Missionary Society, and my many Indian friends and helpers, are no longer accessible to thanks, but it is only right to record the warm and grateful memories they have left behind.

I am indebted to my wife for much valuable help and criticism and to my son Ronald for a number of drawings of native implements.

JOHN GRAHAM KERR

21 October 1949

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