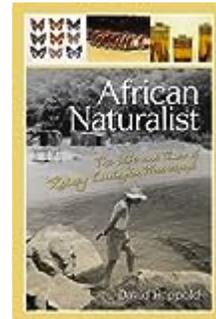




David Happold. *African Naturalist: The Life and Times of Rodney Carrington Wood, 1889-1962.* Brighton: Book Guild Publishing, 2011. ISBN 978-1-84624-555-8.



Reviewed by Tanja Hammel

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D. Happold: African Naturalist

Benjamin Disraeli once suggested: "Read no history: nothing but biography [!]." Angela Partington (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Oxford 1992, p. 248. This biography certainly provides insights into one of the more significant naturalists living in Africa during the first half of the 20th century. 3 mammals, 3 butterflies, 3 fish and 15 insects were named after Wood (pp. 269-272). "This is a different story to most written about Africa" (p. xix), promises the author at the beginning of this biography.* Zoologist David Happold rescues his colleague, Rodney Carrington Wood (1889-1962), a person that influenced his work sustainably from falling into oblivion. Happold has been very "fascinated" by his research subject and with his craft to write on scientific topics for laypersons, he provides a rich tapestry of African history – particularly Nyasaland (Malawi) and the Seychelles. When Happold and his wife, both zoologists, were working in Nigeria and Malawi, they also did research on Wood's special bats in Chiromo, which he had described in 1922. This initiated a seventeen-year-long (1994-2011) "veritable treasure hunt" (p. xviii), culminating in this thoroughly researched study contextualising Wood's life in its localities and times.

Rodney Carrington Wood was a different person to most in Africa. Born in England and leading a conventional early life, he was educated at Ardvreck and Harrow School, where he was part of the Natural History societies, collecting birds. Literary devices such as prolepsis are used to hint at later developments and induce tension. The period prior to Wood's arrival in Chiromo, with a special focus on missionaries' *lieux de mémoire* and travel journals in the 19th century, is also given. Meteorological and geological jargon, unconventional for a biography, used to describe Wood's life is a special feature of this book. Rodney Wood was a "rolling stone". He frequently changed jobs and domiciles, often staying with friends in simple houses with little money. He worked on a farm in Southern Rhodesia (1909-10) and with the British Cotton Growing Association in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1911-14). From 1922-24 Wood was among the boy scouts in Canada and in 1923 in England. He went to America and 1925-29 he earned his living as a tea planter and tobacco farmer in Nyasaland. In 1929 he became Nyasaland's "Game, Cultivation and Tsetse Fly Control Officer" and acted as wildlife hunter. In 1932 he lived as a "gentleman of leisure" in Zimbabwe and

settled teaching Natural History at Michaelhouse (South Africa) in 1933. He also engaged as ornithological assistant travelling in east and southern Africa, conchologist and beachcomber while in the Seychelles, general estate factotum and vermin controller. From 1913 to 1962 he collected birds, archaeological findings, shells and his favourites: butterflies and moths. His collections were sold and donated to various museums, particularly in Bulawayo, London, Pietermaritzburg and Pittsburgh.

Wood's life in the Seychelles (1921-62) is presented through a collection of memories mediated through interviews with his friends such as Nadege Nageon, Marcel Calais and Aubrey Michel. They provide snapshots on Wood's personality and draw a vivid picture of his character. The last chapter provides a comprehensive summary of Wood's life [â], collections, travels, and his contributions to the zoology of Africa (p. xx).

The title 'African Naturalist' seems ambiguous. Wood spent 50 years of his 73-year-long life in Africa, but was not African. He rather needs to be seen in a 'Third Space'. Jonathan Rutherford, *The Third Space*. Interview with Homi Bhabha, in: *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* London 1998, pp. 207-11. While other reviewers wished Happold had used more professional history to inform his subject - e.g. Jane Carruthers's *Wildlife and Warfare: The Life of James Stevenson* (2001) and a number of modern environmental works - [3/10/12]. , I miss the inclusion of studies in the History of Science, History of Knowledge or more recent science biographies. E.g. Jim Endersby, *Imperial Nature. Joseph Hooker and the Practices of Victorian Science*, Chicago 2008; Nicolaas A. Rupke, Richard Owen. *Biology without Darwin*,

Chicago 2009; Nicolaas A. Rupke, Alexander von Humboldt. *A Metabiography*, Chicago 2008. as well as a more detailed description of the role local informants played in Wood's knowledge production (cf. e.g. p. 82). The initial chapters have minor flaws - e.g. typos, wrong dates (e.g., pp. 33-34) and word repetitions. It is a different story - as Happold promised - in the sense that it is not a historian who writes this biography, but a zoologist doing research on his predecessor. It is recommendable for readers interested in the history of Malawi, the Seychelles, zoology and can inform historians - as myself - working within the social and cultural History of Science and Knowledge. One of the author's special fort's is his pictorial description of places similar to Andrew Bank's introduction in *Bushmen in a Victorian World*. The remarkable story of the Bleek-Lloyd Collection of Bushman folklore, Cape Town 2006, pp. 1-11. and his ability not to make a jungle out of history's enchanting garden - Greg Denning, *The Death of William Gooch. A History's Anthropology*, Honolulu 1995, p. 1. by vividly portraying the garden with all its orchids, weeds, and birdbaths in Wood's life story. The inclusion of various genres of source material, the extensive notes and bibliography may lead to subsequent studies. It is an indispensable map for future studies in the field. I would not go as far as Happold and Disraeli and claim that this was a different story to all written about Africa or that we should entirely focus on biographies, but - as this review indicates - biographies can certainly inform historians, raise their interest and initiate their research process.

Notes:

* This review will be published also in the *Journal Southern African Studies*

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