

But what about the dynamite?

Maya excavator merits awe

Dream of Maya: Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon in Nineteenth Century Yucatan
By Lawrence Gustave Desmond and Phyllis Mauch Messenger. U. of New Mexico Press (Albuquerque, NM 87131), 1988. 147 pages, copious black and white photographs and drawings.

Book reviewers should approach their subjects impartially, not permitting any pre-conceptions or philosophies set in concrete to affect the critique.

To be quite honest, this reviewer opened *A Dream of Maya* with definite ideas on the subject: to wit, Augustus Le Plongeon was a dreamer, at best, and an archeological horror at worst—he was convinced that the Maya were the cradle of civilization for the whole world and he used dynamite to “excavate” Uxmal. So he must have been crazy.

This book proves him to be a dreamer as well as a well-trained photographer who could develop his stereopticon negatives in makeshift darkrooms set up in inner rooms of the Governor's Palace at Uxmal. He's also a self-taught archeologist who supervised and did so much excavating with his own hands in the suffocating heat of Yucatan that you have to respect him.

This American doctor of medicine, with his British-born wife, Alice, spent close to 30 years at Chichen Itza and Uxmal, with one side trip to Belize. All the years of excavation, theorizing, and working were paid for by whatever they could sell of their stereo photography, writing, and lecturing, and from their own limited personal funds, augmented with dribs and drabs of aid from prominent Americans here and there.

They spent a fortune, contracted disease, lived in horrendous conditions, learned Yucatecan Maya, knew Uxmal and Chichen Itza well, and yet clung to the idea that this was the center of the world. Nothing would sway them from their conviction that this was the original Eden, that a Mayan princess whom Le Plongeon named Queen Moo (from the Mayan word for “macaw”) was driven from Chichen Itza, reached Atlantis, and ended up in Egypt as the goddess Isis.

Now, I ask you—it is, to say the least, a bit eccentric, isn't it?

At the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars, the bearded doctor uncovered a seated figure with a bowl on its chest containing a jade bead and what La Plongeon took



DREAM OF MAYA: Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon

to be the cremated heart of a personage he called Prince Chacmol (meaning “powerful warrior”), the brother of his Queen Moo. The “heart” did prove to be an unidentified burned section of a human body. Back in the U.S., however, his editor changed the spelling to “chacmool” (which happened to mean “puma”) which became the accepted name for Le Plongeon's statue and other subsequent similar discoveries.

The more this reviewer read, the greater grew the intrigue with this over-dedicated couple who were giving up their creature comforts, their very lives, to photograph and document a strange lost world under alien, uncomfortably hot, and primitive conditions, all to prove an unprovable theory.

But what about the dynamite? There was still that. How could this incredibly hard-working—if misguided—scientist blow up a site he was working on? Well, see page 81.

Hearing of the discovery of a

fine sculpture thought to be Chacmool's brother, the administrator of the land on which Uxmal stood decided to carry off, for re-use elsewhere, the finely-polished building stones as well as the sculpture.

So... Dr. Le Plongeon put a notice in the local Merida paper stating he was placing dynamite near the statue. There was no dynamite. The plundering of the stones stopped but Le Plongeon thus added another wrinkle to the coat of misconceptions he had long been wearing.

Le Plongeon was many contradictory things, but he and Alice worked incredibly hard and, in the mistaken cause of attempting to relocate the cradle of civilization, put the Yucatecan Maya on the map. The book is fascinating and makes excellent reading even for those whose interest in the Maya has yet to be awakened. It is well written, well documented; in short, fascinating.

—Mary Louise Wilkinson

BOOKS

Caribbean reference book is an all-around winner

The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Culture, and Environmental Change Since 1942. By David Watts. Cambridge U. Press (32 East 57th St. NY 10016). 1987. 609 pp.

Geographer David Watts has written an outstanding, encyclopedic reference volume on the Caribbean. Crammed with historical and geographic information from 1492 to the present, it contains a formidable bibliography and a superb set of maps and tables. Much of the book covers the history of sugar cultivation in the region with a treasure-trove of island-by-island data on prices, cultivation techniques, colonial planters, slave-master ratios, and other information.

The particular strength of this study is in its emphasis on the effects of demography and agriculture on the West Indian environment. One excellent chapter surveys what is known about pre-colonial Indian life in the region and the man-environment equilibrium. The effects of the introduction of livestock, plants and weeds, sugar cane, and other techniques are all carefully traced.

The examination of agricultural innovations from 1500 to 1833 and the emancipation of slaves is a fine piece of detective work. It both refutes the notion that plantation agriculture was technologically static during this period

while accounting for the slow and skewed pace of change. Another chapter cogently takes readers through the 18th century colonial wars in the region and their effects island by island.

This attempt to study the effects of the environment over an extended historical period works. Not only do we understand the disappearance of much of the indigenous wildlife, especially birds, but also the very early onset of soil erosion. “There is little doubt that the effect of development on environment within the island Caribbean has overwhelmingly been a negative one.... Substantial environmental deterioration has taken place in almost all areas in which settlement has been other than minimal.”

This is an invaluable reference work happily synthesizing and organizing massive amounts of demographic, economic, geographic, environmental, and other data. Although the concentration is on the West Indies, there is ample material on Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and the French Antilles. The marriage of geography; history, and environmental analysis is conceptually successful and ably supported by the massive collection of data. An all-around winner.

—Aaron Segal

The Jewish connection

The Latin American Community of Israel

By Donald L. Herman. Praeger Publishers (321 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10017), 1984. 151 pages.

Most of the 500,000 Latin American Jews live in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and Mexico, and are urban middle and upper-middle class professionals and business people.

They face a declining birth rate and weakening of their institutions, family unity, identity, and practice of Judaism amid mixed marriages and anti-semitism. Younger people turn to social and sports organizations for group activities.

The author, a political scientist, maintains that many Jews

leave their homelands due to political insignificance, persecution, or a preference for Israel over the Diaspora.

Of the 100,000 who resettled in Israel, about 85 percent live in cities and 15 percent in agricultural and industrial settlements.

According to Dr. Herman, interviews point out that many of these Jews are fully integrated in Israeli society. Others speak Hebrew and identify culturally but lack Israeli-born friends and full assimilation.

The author foresees future immigration. One question is whether the past and present immigrants will bring Latin American culture to bear on Israeli customs.

—James W. Carty

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Publication notes

Caribbean Affairs, described in a brochure as “the region's most informative journal on and about the countries in the Caribbean Basin” and “written and edited exclusively by Caribbean people” is a quarterly, published by the Trinidad Express Newspapers Ltd., P.O. Box 1252, Port of Spain, Trinidad (\$20 for four

issues). Noting that Caribbean issues are always discussed from the perspective of North American and European scholars, *Caribbean Affairs* presents the region's own views by “an abundance of scholars, businessmen, and journalists who have intelligence and wit.”

Andean Newsletter is a publication of the Andean Commission of Jurists, “a non-governmental organization with consultative status at the UN.” Its stated objective is to provide current information about human rights, drug trafficking, the rule of law, and other important themes concerning the Andean countries. Edited by Diego Garcia-Sayan. Write to Los Sauces 285, Lima 27, Peru.

REVIEWERS

• Ma. Wilkinson, a Senior Reviewer and original *Times of Havana* staffer, is past president of the Institute of Maya Studies in Miami.

• Mr. Segal, a Senior Reviewer, is a visiting professor at the American College in Paris.

• Mr. Carty, a Senior Reviewer, is a professor of communications at Bethany College, W. Va.