

## E.H. Aitken A Naturalist on the Prowl

"An accurate and amusing writer of natural history subjects ... a Christian gentleman of singular simplicity and modesty and great charm of manner." That is Edward Hamilton Aitken for you, as described in a memoir in the 1914 edition of his book *CONCERNING ANIMALS AND OTHER MATTERS*. Another among his delightful books, *A NATURALIST ON THE PROWL*, sums up what his vocation was, or rather, what he did during his spare time! Edward Hamilton Aitken, a.k.a. EHA, was one of the founders of Bombay Natural History Society and its first Honorary Secretary.

EHA was born in a missionary family in Satara in 1851. His father Revd James Aitken was a missionary of the Free Church of Scotland posted in India. EHA was initially educated at home, and subsequently entered the Bombay University (now University of Mumbai) to acquire BA and MA degrees. He joined the Provincial Education Service and taught at the Deccan College in Poona for a few years. He then moved to the Customs and Salt Department, and served in several regions including Bombay, progressing to become the Collector of Customs at Karachi. He retired in 1906

"It is impossible to conceive a fate of more unmitigated horror than that of a frog being sucked down by a snake, its foot already undergoing digestion, its leg stretching all the way down the enemy's slimy throat, and its body slowly but surely following. Happily frogs cannot have much imagination, yet they must realize the situation to some extent, for they give expression to the anguish of their souls every few minutes in a wail so unspeakably woeful, that it would melt the hardest heart. It has often melted mine to such an extent, that I have gone out with my stick to slay the snake, and release the frog."

... E.H. Aitken — *THE TRIBES ON MY FRONTIER*

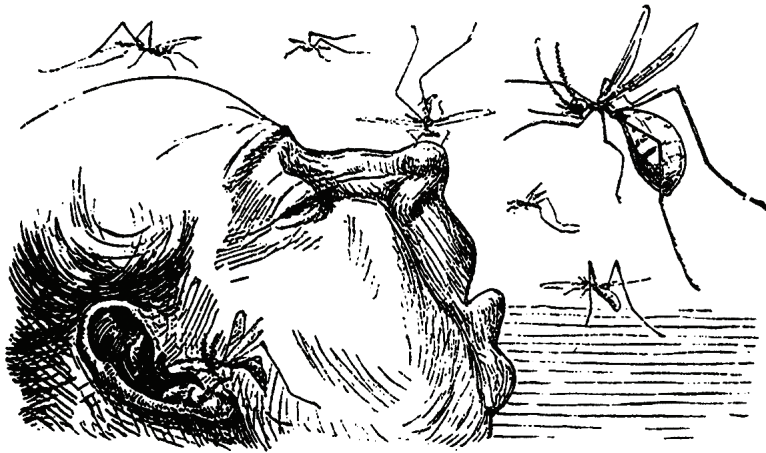
and moved to Edinburgh in search of his Scottish roots, where he died on April 11, 1909.

Nothing in nature missed EHA's eye, whether mundane or unusual. His regular contributions to the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society (JBNHS)* since its inception in 1886 (he was one of the first joint editors) reveal the vast expanse of his interest

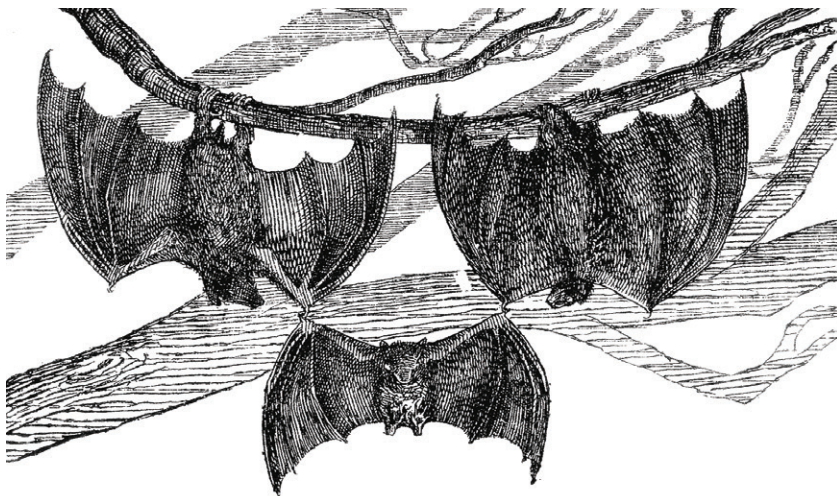
in and understanding of nature. All branches of Zoology fascinated him, but more so birds and insects, especially butterflies. He recognized in each animal a soul and a character of its own. He loved them all and kept numerous pets, including birds which he never tired of watching. EHA spent his spare time studying animal life, but was unwilling to hurt an animal, even for scientific collection. He believed in collecting just enough specimens to study and obtain knowledge of their life cycle and habits. EHA contributed significantly to the Society's bird collection.

Not only was he a master at grasping the characteristic features and behaviour of individual species, but also in rendering them eloquently in print, in a style punctuated by wry humour. And then, there were his rather quaint sketches, which could enliven even a less exciting subject such as hands and feet. His writings illustrated the joyousness of living, and there was a poetic quality to his narration, whether he was writing about rats, mosquitoes, lizards, or vultures. Some of his well-known books include *THE TRIBES ON MY FRONTIER: AN INDIAN NATURALIST'S FOREIGN POLICY*, *THE COMMON BIRDS OF BOMBAY*, and *BEHIND THE BUNGALOW*. His book *THE FIVE WINDOWS OF THE SOUL*, a philosophical and speculative masterpiece on the five senses and how they bring us in contact with our surroundings, reveals a different dimension of his personality.

EHA's popularity as a writer came from the columns he wrote for newspapers and magazines such as *The Times of India*, *Strand*, and *Pall Mall*. Loke Wan Tho, an ornithologist and photographer, remarked on his writings, "There is much poetry in EHA's writings built on a solid foundation of sound observation,



"Why do mosquitoes bite? The question has exercised me much, and it is painfully clear to my mind that modern science has made it more difficult to answer than it was before ... When a mosquito settles on you it pricks up its ears for a moment, to make sure that there is no danger near, and then walks about slowly, probing for a soft place. When it has found one, it fixes the tube and begins to drive it home. Then is the moment to smite it" ... E.H. Aitken — THE TRIBES ON MY FRONTIER



"Bats have one lovely virtue, and that is family affection. I shall never forget a captive family of demon bats which I once saw, the grim old papa, the mother perhaps a trifle more hideous, and the half-grown youngster, not quite able yet to provide for himself. There was something very touching in the tender attachment to one another of three such ill-omened objects"

... E.H. Aitken — THE TRIBES ON MY FRONTIER

yet made immortal by the magic of words. It is especially true for THE TRIBES ON MY FRONTIER, which is an extended metaphor on war and the frontier tribes associated with it." Loke Wan Tho also observed, "He contributed little in the field of original scientific research, except for some work on mosquitoes and butterflies there is nothing else to remember him by in science". This would be an unfair remark on EHA, who studied natural history not only for its own sake but also for making it beneficial to the people of India. For instance, his deep understanding of birds – a result of his study and keen sense of observation – comes through starkly in his book THE COMMON BIRDS OF BOMBAY. Aitken discovered a new species of anopheline mosquito which was named *Anopheles aitkeni* after him.

EHA was an equally shrewd observer of humanity, as evinced in his book BEHIND THE BUNGALOW where he talks about *The Ayah*, *The Body-guards*, *That Dhobie* and so on, all those seen but never noticed by society at large. Strongly religious, a pleasant companion, broad-minded, exceedingly tolerant of other's weaknesses, gentle and lovable, EHA was exemplary in having no enemies. Patient observation, charm, humour, and love for his subjects were some of the qualities that distinguished him from other naturalists and made him an eternal naturalist writer. ■

"Butterfly-hunting is a means, not an end. The end is to know them, to become intimate with them, so that, as you move about the garden, or lie dreaming, each gay pleasure-hunter that flits by you may be an acquaintance with a character and an individuality of its own. These are just the situations that butterflies revel in, where rippling water runs among shady trees, and Art has let Nature alone ... Every double flower is an abomination to butterflies."

... E.H. Aitken — THE TRIBES ON MY FRONTIER