

BOOK REVIEWS

DINOSAUR IMPRESSIONS, POSTCARDS FROM A PALEONTOLOGIST, by Philippe Taquet (translated by Kevin Padian), 1998, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 244 p., \$45.00 (cloth) \$17.00 (paper)

In the past two decades, dinosaurs have become big business. All three *Jurassic Park* movies made hundreds of millions of dollars. Dinosaur paraphernalia is on sale everywhere, yet none of the profits go to supporting dinosaur research. The cable channels now carry science documentaries full-time, with frequent dinosaur programs on PBS, Discovery Channel, Science Channel, and others. Each of these documentaries tend to glamorize dinosaur research (as if that were the only aspect of paleontology), and a small handful of scientists have become media stars by their frequent appearances on such shows.

In this context, it is worthwhile to step back and realize the debt that today's dino-superstars owe to the previous generation of scientists who did not benefit from dinomania, but worked in relative obscurity and did not have camera crews recording their every move. Foremost of these is the French paleontologist Philippe Taquet, who spent most of his career at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, and even served as its director. Back when dinosaur hunting was much less glamorous and well funded, Taquet was one of the few individuals braving harsh conditions in some of the remotest corners of the Earth to find new dinosaurs, and to fill in gaps of our knowledge of dinosaurs on several continents. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he mounted a series of expeditions to the Sahara Desert in countries that were once part of French West Africa, especially Morocco, Algeria, and Niger. Twenty years before American paleontologists visited the region, Taquet discovered the first dinosaurs from the Lower Cretaceous of Niger, including the sail-backed iguanodont *Ouranosaurus* and previously unknown large sauropods. He followed this discovery with that of the gigantic crocodile *Sarcosuchus*, which has been much publicized recently when another scientist found additional specimens (the press seldom gives credit to Taquet's original discovery of the taxon, and acts as though the later American scientist was the first to find this amazing crocodile.). His next discovery was in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco; once described, it became one of the largest sauropods found (since surpassed by even bigger sauropods elsewhere). All of these discoveries received credit in the French press over 30 years ago, and then were forgotten except by the specialists (or more likely, seldom noticed in the English-speaking world).

And that is a great pity, because Taquet is a great

writer and storyteller, recounting both the trials and tribulations of field work in such hostile, forbidding, remote places, yet leavening his account with humorous anecdotes as well. His writing is graceful and fluidly written (in this excellent translation by Kevin Padian). Taquet manages to introduce the necessary scientific background when appropriate, without writing above the head of the intelligent layperson. Reading this book gives a valuable perspective on all the recent books by younger dinosaur specialists who act as if they were the first to travel abroad and find specimens in exotic places.

And what amazing places Taquet has worked! Not just western Africa, but several trips to Mongolia (long before the current stampede of American paleontologists), and even an expedition to Laos in the early 1990s (after the conflict over southeast Asia finally ended). Taquet's trips to Laos were like many of his others. He followed the early French geologists who, while doing reconnaissance mapping of the region, casually mentioned large bones in their report. Taquet then tracked down the exact spot where the bones had been found and made many more important discoveries. Each of these regions (Niger, Morocco, Laos, and so on) was relatively unknown so far as the paleontology of its Mesozoic faunas went, but thanks to Taquet, they are now important parts of the Mesozoic biogeographic puzzle.

Not surprisingly, the book is thoroughly French not only in its original language, but its attitude and ideas. When Taquet discusses ideas in geology, systematics, biogeography, and mass extinction theory, he clearly is more familiar with the ideas of his French colleagues than he is with the wider literature of the English-speaking geological community. For example, those of us who know the standard accounts of the early days of plate tectonics will be surprised to read Taquet's perspective on Xavier le Pichon's contribution versus those of American and British researchers who receive greater credit in the Anglophone world. His final chapter gives a history of the discovery of dinosaurs in Europe, with French scientists (justifiably focusing on Cuvier) given a lion's share of the credit. His account of the K-T extinction debate is conservative and clearly skeptical of the huge amount of research supporting the impact model (even for a survey written in 1994). The author and translator have compensated for this additional new information by adding an "Afterword" section that updates some of the post-1994 pre-1998 developments in dinosaur paleontology. Some of this skepticism toward the asteroid impact model may reflect the inherent attitude of the entire vertebrate paleontology community, but it does seem as though Taquet is not as aware of this literature as those of us who read *Nature* and *Science* regularly.

These quibbles aside, this book is a "must-read" for anyone interested in dinosaurs, their discovery, and their discoverers. It is a valuable antidote to the current celebrity-driven version of dinosaur paleontology, which gives all the credit to a handful of glamorous media stars who are merely following in the footsteps of people like Taquet.

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