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by Sheldon Dingle

Jean Delacour, a tribute

In 1841 Thomas Carlyle wrote, "One comfort is that Great Men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near." These words ring in my mind each year when Dr. Jean Delacour visits Southern California. Some of more fortunate aviculturists have had the privilege of spending many pleasant and profitable hours with this great man. The rewards are many.

Fortunately, however, some of the greatness of Dr. Delacour's thoughts and feelings is now available even to those unable to visit with him in person. He has written an excellent volume called *The Living Air, the memoirs of an ornithologist*. It is published by Country Life Limited Edition, Tower House Southampton St., London, 1966. No one can read the book without being influenced for the good. Even the good friends of Dr. Delacour will learn things that through modesty the great man failed to share in conversation.

Jean Delacour was born in France before the turn of the century. His family had vast holdings including three estates in different parts of France. The estates included much farmland and of course ancient and beautiful chateaux with their formal grounds and retinues of attendants.

Delacour's earliest memory is of his bedroom in Paris when he was three years old. He had been sick and to entertain him during his recovery his parents provided a box. "It was no ordinary box," says Jean Delacour, "but, in fact, a perfect little bird coop. In it lived a white, downy chick, my greatest trea-

sure." Of course, young Delacour recovered from his illness but he never got over his fascination with birds.

On his fifth birthday, Delacour was given a pair of canaries which he successfully bred and commenced his career in aviculture. For his tenth birthday he received control of the aviary that had long stood on one of the estates, Villers. The aviary was in three compartments each twenty five feet long, fifteen feet wide, and ten feet high. With youthful enthusiasm (which at the age of eighty-six he still has) and the help of the head gardener, ten year old Delacour planned and developed a very nice collection of birds.

During the next few years, school dominated Delacour's time. He was an outstanding student — usually the top in his class. He studied the various aspects of natural history at every opportunity including a number of classes in Paris Universities and Museums. At this time Villers became home for Delacour and he devoted enormous energy to developing his collection of plants and birds. When the Villers aviaries were completed they were magnificent.

Of them, Dr. Delacour says, "To this day, this great aviary has never been equalled, either in a public zoo or in a private park, and its large size, perfect finish and unusually attractive setting would be difficult to match. The cages could not be seen from the outside, you opened a door near the end of a long wall, screened by trees and shrubs, and suddenly you found yourself surrounded by birds. You walked along straight paths, all lined with flowers, each compartment was a little garden in which gorgeous birds showed to full advantage. The cages were varied in shape and size; here and there, other paths began, affording new vistas. At a turn one entered the

indoor gallery, with its rows of cages, and it looked like a library of birds, showing among tropical plants. Even in these early years one could see there hummingbirds, sun birds, and birds of paradise, then very unusual."

This phase of Delacour's life was ended by the First World War. He was wounded in combat and Villers received 3000 to 30,000 shells per day for three months. It was totally and utterly destroyed and the Villers period passed into history.

After the war, Delacour purchased the Chateau Cleres. He began all over again and pulled together plants, birds, and animals to form his own Garden of Eden. As Cleres developed and finally was put in good order, Delacour took a tour of the Caribbean. He visited the local dignitaries and camped in the forests studying the local birds and animals. To more thoroughly study the flora and fauna Delacour collected many specimens and returned to France with a good collection of live birds, skins, and many plants. This caribbean trip served as a training ground for further expeditions.

With Cleres as home base, Delacour ventured out on seven major expeditions during the years between 1924 and 1939. He led scientific expeditions into Central Annam, Laos, Cochin China, Eastern Tonkin, and Laos. In many cases Delacour was the first one to scientifically examine these primitive and wild parts of the world. After the first expedition the British Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, the Chicago Museum, and the Harvard Museum participated in the collecting trips. After Delacour studied the specimens they were distributed to the various museums.

In between expeditions Delacour traveled throughout India, staying with

View of Dr. Delacour's estate of Villers, in France, before it's destruction during World War I.



different Maharajas and studying the local birds. He visited Japan and had audience with Emperor Hirohito, himself a noted zoologist. Delacour was asked to lead an expedition to Madagascar which he did and collected many live and museum specimens of birds and other animals.

When the Second World War disrupted the peaceful existence in Europe, Delacour came to New York to live. He was offered a position as technical advisor to the New York Zoological Society. He also served as research associate at the American Museum of Natural History and acted as collaborator of the Fish and Wildlife Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

When the war ended M. Delacour continued serving in these positions and also began rebuilding Cleres which had been damaged by bombs. He was then asked to assume the Directorship of the Department of History, Sciences and Arts of the County of Los Angeles. He served the museum for nine years until he reached the age of mandatory retirement. Delacour's multitude of skills were employed in making the Los Angeles County Museum one of the finest in this country. It was during his sojourn in Los Angeles that many local aviculturists gained his acquaintance — much to their profit.

After his retirement this great man continued to travel, study, and develop Cleres. His travels still bring him to Southern California for a couple of months each winter. He is a remarkable man — an explorer, taxonomist, museum director, connoisseur of the arts, field naturalist, aviculturist, horticulturist, and tireless campaigner for the conservation of wildlife. He has written many books including such classics as *Waterfowl of the World*, four volumes, *Les Oiseaux de l'Indochine*, *Birds of the Philippines*, *Birds of Malaysia*, and *Pheasants of the World*.

Near the end of his autobiography Jean Delacour says, "It becomes difficult to face the future. One has the uneasy feeling of being anachronistic. The end lurks around the corner, and it must be met gracefully, but I pray that it comes before my interest in life has been dulled or even suppressed by illness and infirmity. Until then I shall delight in all that is beautiful, exciting, or simply funny in the world, and I am resigned to departing at anytime, without regret. I believe that I have accomplished what, perhaps foolishly, mattered to me, and I have benefitted from more advantages than I could have expected."

And the whole world has benefitted from the greatness of this man, Dr. Jean Delacour.

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