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BOOK REVIEW

Livet i havet: Theodor Mortensens Stillehavsekspektion 1913-1916, by Sara Fasmer Hansen and Tine Fasmer Hansen, Copenhagen, Lindhardt og Ringhof Forlag, 2025, 432 pp., DKK 400 (hbk), ISBN: 978-87-2701-739-6

This is a biography of the Danish zoologist Dr Theodor Mortensen (1868-1952), known for his 16 volume monograph on the world's sea urchins. The book "Life in the Ocean: Theodor Mortensen's Pacific Ocean Expedition 1913-1916" focuses on his three year expedition around the world to collect sea urchins and other marine organisms, but also extensively covers his relations to other researchers and travellers, his family and his later career. It gives good insights into the conditions for biological work and travelling at the time, also interesting general historical perspectives. The book is richly illustrated mainly with Mortensen's own photos of localities and specimens, and with his drawings (his monograph contains 2500 of his own drawings).

The book is in large format. The authors are Mortensen's great-grandchild and great-great-grandchild, the first (Tine) a journalist, and Sara a biochemist. They have with impressive dedication for their forebear amassed much material from many sources to compose a captivating account of the son of a deeply religious, rather poor teacher in the countryside (about 40 km northwest of Copenhagen). Mortensen first studied theology to please his parents, but became a convinced Darwinist and studied zoology. His first work was on shrimps, but he quickly discovered the lack of knowledge of the early developmental stages of echinoderms. He wrote his dissertation (1897) on this subject, and on his later expeditions he focused (apart from collecting) on breeding experiments to describe the larval stages which he used in his taxonomic revisions.

The quality and quantity of work which could be done in those days with simple means is impressive and inspiring. Mortensen received the Linnean Society's Gold Medal, the "Nobel prize for taxonomists", in 1951. Probably it was easier back then to find undescribed species, but it also took more to treat them brilliantly, without the technological tools available today. The best of the old naturalists were also artists, and the aesthetic pleasures with the structurally beautiful sea

urchins could have wider appeal, also as iconic creatures for nature conservation. The book not only shows Mortensen's artistic illustrations, but also cites his excitement when rare and beautiful specimens appear from the depths. "It is a wonderful moment when the net lies spread out in front of you, filled with things which perhaps have never before been seen by any human eye, and if there among the animals are new and rare forms which mean a widening of our view and knowledge, you are filled with a deep feeling of gratefulness and happiness. I must say that I have often been very happy."

It is impressive how much of his taxonomy is still valid today, and perhaps even more impressive how many marine organisms of all kinds he managed to collect. From this material (preserved in the Natural History Museum of Denmark) new species have been described ever since, even in recent years: a strong argument for taking good care of natural history collections! Generally, a biography of this kind is a great way to communicate excitement for biodiversity, the old naturalist-explorers have potential for being inspiring role models for a new generation of biologists with focus on taxonomy, a sadly neglected subject in academia for many years. Surely many such individuals from around the world deserve a biography just as eminent scientists in other fields do. They still have a role to fill for posterity as ambassadors for love of biodiversity, this fascination being an important part of human spirituality, and they are often notable intellectual figures. Of course, a precondition is that sufficient archive material can be found. Sadly, not all have been so profuse in writing notebooks and letters as Mortensen.

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