Far Away and Long Ago Short Guide

Far Away and Long Ago by William Henry Hudson

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Overview

Far Away and Long Ago tells of the author's life until about age seventeen.

The book develops two important themes: a boy's growing involvement with nature and his coming to terms with death. From his earliest memories at about age four, Hudson discerns an extraordinary response to and delight in nature—its sights, sounds, and odors.

The book conveys this delight by narrating the author's experiences with birds, plants, mammals, and reptiles of the Argentine pampas where he grew up.

Beyond portraying the boy's simple delight, it shows a keen observer develop into a skilled naturalist. The book suggests that Hudson is more at home with nature than with human beings; he even prefers the solitude of nature to playing games with his siblings.

Throughout the book, Hudson develops the universal theme of death, first among animals, then people. Hudson finds death profoundly troubling, yet his mother comforts him by explaining her belief in the individual immortality of humans. Later, when he faces his own imminent death, he struggles to come to terms with the question and abandons the early optimism provided by his mother. Ironically, his life does not end early, as he expects, but continues for an additional sixty-five years.

About the Author

William Henry Hudson was born of American parents on the Argentine pampas south of Buenos Aires on August 4, 1841. In the 1830s his father, Daniel Hudson, took the advice of his doctor to seek a healthier climate and purchased a ranch named "The Twentyfive Ombus" after its native softwood trees. When William was five, the family moved to a more remote and isolated ranch, The Acacias." Until his death in 1868, Daniel Hudson operated the ranch and a small store, earning enough to provide for his wife and six children but never becoming affluent. Since there was no school nearby and the family could not afford boarding schools, the Hudson children were largely self-taught.

As a child, W. H. Hudson developed and nurtured a passionate interest in nature, especially birds. His most enjoyable and memorable activities involved exploring the flora and fauna of the area surrounding his home. Among his special delights were the observation of animal behavior and the discovery of unusual plants and birds. By age six, when he first learned to ride a pony and could thus cover much ground in a day's time, Hudson was well on his way toward becoming a naturalist.

During a visit to Buenos Aires at age fifteen, he contracted typhus and a short time later developed rheumatic fever, which permanently weakened his heart.

After a long illness that his doctors considered terminal, Hudson recovered sufficiently to resume his studies. In 1866 he began collecting bird skins for the Smithsonian Institution. Then he engaged in a study of South American birds under the direction of renowned ornithologist Spencer F. Baird. He later did similar work for the London Zoological Society and gained recognition by correcting an erroneous assumption that Charles Darwin had made regarding woodpeckers on the pampas.

Following the death of his father, Hudson immigrated to England in 1874.

Almost penniless, he settled in London, where he began collaborating with ornithologists on publications about birds. He continued his work as a naturalist, writing about the birds of Argentina and studying those of England. In 1876 he married Emily Wingrave, a former opera singer who was fifteen years older than he and operated a London boarding house. Eventually they settled into a London house that she had inherited, but Hudson, uncomfortable in the city, spent much of his time in rural England studying birds. Along with his nature study, he began writing fiction, but his early efforts were not commercially successful. He first gained literary recognition for The Purple Land, a novel with an exotic South American setting.

He became a British subject in 1900, and the following year, still in straitened financial circumstances, he was awarded a pension by the British government for his contributions as a naturalist. His books met with increasing literary success, and he eventually resigned his pension because it was no longer needed. His novel Green Mansions, an idyllic romance set in the Venezuelan jungle, became his most successful

work. During 1915-1916, while hospitalized with a prolonged fever, he began writing his autobiography, Far Away and Long Ago. Hudson died in London on August 18, 1922, a year after his wife's death.

Setting

Except for two brief excursions to Buenos Aires, the setting is the expanse of the gently rolling Argentine pampas during the mid-nineteenth century. The influence of this exotic setting is vital to the author's development. Hudson provides ample description to give the reader a sense of place. He describes the terrain, buildings, seasonal changes, climate, and storms.

As far as the eye can see, the land appears flat, heavily overgrown with thistles and native grasses, too dry for crops but suitable for horses, cattle, sheep, and goats. Trees can be discerned along widely dispersed water ways and near human dwellings; the nearest to Hudson's home is more than a mile away. For Hudson and his five siblings there is no school and no church. The nearest village is eight miles away, and contact with people outside the family occurs infrequently. The families of the remote ranches occasionally visit each other, and their houses attract traveling salesmen, fugitives, desperadoes, and beggars.

Yet for children growing up, the remote region proves congenial. The house has a good library, and indulgent parents give them liberty to explore their surroundings to their hearts' desire. The dangers of accidents, attacks by animals such as wild pigs, and bites by poisonous serpents, though genuine, do not exceed those inherent in developed areas. Left to their own resources, the children expand their imaginative powers. The wide open expanse leaves its mark on Hudson, becoming a laboratory for the developing naturalist and making him feel ever afterward uncomfortable and cramped in cities.

Social Sensitivity

Hudson's theme of death, a major motif of the autobiography, may at times trouble readers because the descriptions include violence, especially in the deaths of animals. Occasionally, the book describes deliberate cruelty among the gauchos. On the other hand, while the narrator is compelled to come to terms with the thought of his own death, he has little fear of it.

This tragic possibility leads to the introduction of the author's religious views, absent from most of the autobiography. It is clear that in the end Hudson is skeptical about immortality, but the expression of his skepticism is guarded.

He reports the religious attitudes of several other characters—his mother, who has strong faith; an old gaucho who has none; and his two brothers, one on either side. In brief passages, the book deals frankly with the theory of evolution's effects on nineteenth-century thought.

A further, minor point in the novel involves racism. Modern readers will recognize an undercurrent of European attitudes of superiority commonly seen in writings of the time. There is not a trace of the kind of racism that implies conflict or hostility, but rather a trace of the patronizing attitudes that occur prominently in authors such as Rudyard Kipling.

Literary Qualities

As an autobiography, Far Away and Long Ago, like Winston Churchill's My Early Life, is limited to the author's youth. Hudson explains that upon contracting a six-week fever in old age, he discovered on the second day that memories of childhood came thronging back to him, and he wrote them down over the duration of his illness. The narrative covers his life until about age seventeen, but Hudson acknowledges that the chronology is not exact. His earliest memories begin at age four, and the book highlights ages six, ten, and fifteen, ignoring entirely the years from twelve through fourteen. He first learns to ride a pony at age six and to shoot a gun at ten. He suffers his first serious illness, typhus, at fifteen. The result of Hudson's narrative technique is a kind of loose collection of episodes.

Each chapter focuses on the author's experiences with people or nature. The characterization often resembles that of tall tales or brief vignettes. One memorable but brief encounter involves an unnamed young man whom Hudson finds tied up in a barn. The man's dejected expression suggests trouble, and Hudson later learns that the young man has murdered someone and is awaiting punishment. On another occasion, a beggar, dressed grotesquely like Don Quixote and accompanied by a servant, arrives on horseback and presents a list of his needs. Once these have been granted, he provides an additional list, accepting the gifts as his due.

This done, he rides away. It is the unusual experience, the somewhat bizarre or dangerous event, that stamps the clearest impression on the growing boy.

Hudson's style is marked by grace, rhythm, and clarity, with simple sentences and diction. This is not to say, however, that it presents no problems for readers. Hudson retains a good many Spanish words without translating them for the reader. Even a budding naturalist may have problems with the animal and bird nomenclature, since some of the species' names have changed since the book was written and a good many of the species are limited to Hudson's setting. Yet for some species native to the pampas, such as the ombu tree, he offers richly phrased descriptions that both explain and make memorable the living plant or animal. A remarkable detail of style is Hudson's inclination to use bird imagery to describe the appearance, manner, and character of human beings, as if birds represent the norm.

Themes and Characters

The primary theme of Hudson's autobiography is man's relationship with nature, seen not as adversarial but rather as nurturing to body and spirit.

By presenting selected episodes from his childhood and youth, Hudson clarifies his own experiences in nature. Besides the wondering, sensitive, and thoroughly appealing protagonist, few characters receive more than brief sketches.

Hudson's father, a kindly but somewhat incautious man, is recalled primarily for his courage, having shown himself fearless in the face of human and natural dangers. His mother, who receives greater attention, appears warm and supportive. Neither parent believes in punishing children; they seldom interfere with the children's activities, and Hudson praises their laissez-faire attitudes. Among his siblings, Hudson feels closest to a younger brother, and this attachment, he says, prolongs his own childhood. Yet he receives more guidance from his independent older brother Edwin, who introduces him to the work of Charles Darwin.

Besides family members, numerous other characters are briefly sketched, but they usually have only small parts in single episodes. Among the more memorable ones, a beautiful young woman, Margarita, the children's nursery maid, contracts tuberculosis, and on a visit to her home following her death, Hudson cannot bear to see her body. Of the three tutors who help briefly with the children's education, Mr. Trigg remains the most memorable. A former actor with a split personality, he entertains adults with mimicry and endless collections of stories but becomes tyrannical in the classroom. On one occasion, he goes too far by using his riding crop on the children and is dismissed in disgrace. In another sketch, an English neighbor, Mr. Royd, a man with a pleasing manner and endless schemes for acquiring wealth, falls into depression, leaves for the city, and commits suicide.

In describing other characters, the autobiography stresses their unusual and often eccentric qualities. One, Don Gregorio Gandara, has a passion for piebald horses and builds his own large herd. The patriarchal Don Evaristo Penalva, considered a wise counselor and healer by his neighbors, keeps six wives at his ranch, and no one finds his polygamy especially offensive. The aged Alcalde, the foremost civil officer in the region, proves unable to save a young kinsman from brutal execution by his subordinates. The gauchos are colorful but often cruel and unpredictable.

Quick to anger and eager for revenge, they harbor a violence that constantly simmers beneath the surface. Once when the author and his brother try to learn the gaucho's method of fighting with a knife, the author is accidentally wounded by his brother. Yet, however violent and dangerous the gauchos are among themselves, they present no danger to children. Even the beggars on the pampas are harmless, unlike the threatening ones in Buenos Aires.

Although not usually a threat, the human characters are often eccentric, unpredictable, and mysterious, in part because the young Hudson cannot grasp their contradictions and inconsistencies. As a small child, he attempts to catch the almost tame doves that populate his yard. An adult tells him to put salt on their tails, and he is surprised to discover that it does not work. The realization that he has been deceived profoundly troubles the boy. On the other hand, nature, despite its rich variety and complexity, can usually be understood because discoverable motives drive its creatures. Nature can be strange, but it is seldom contradictory, and it seems to the protagonist that its secrets can be fathomed through careful observation and reasoning.

Hudson's development of nature as a theme owes something to the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth and to Wordsworth's predecessors Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne. Like Wordsworth, Hudson believes that early childhood is a time of sensuous, unreasoning responses. Since his own senses were acute, Hudson describes in detail his reactions to plants and animals. Denied any but the most primitive aesthetic pleasures and surrounded by a landscape almost uniformly flat and green, he derives aesthetic pleasure from the colors and sounds of living things.

Beyond the aesthetic response, Hudson describes his own tendency—called "animism"—to endow nature with spiritual qualities, to find in nature a spiritual presence akin to that described by Wordsworth. He recognizes, however, that animism is only a tendency in man and does not actually constitute evidence of the presence of a spirit or God in nature. In his concluding chapter, he affirms that throughout his life he never lost his affinity for nature or his pleasurable responses to it.

Topics for Discussion

1. Violence, cruelty, and killing are viewed with disapproval in Hudson's work, yet some forms of killing animals are accepted. Discuss the distinctions, centering on the episodes of the owl and the pigeons, the gauchos' slaughtering of cattle, the death of the young officer, Hudson's own hunting, and the killing of the frogs.

2. The gauchos live by a code of conduct foreign to Hudson and his family.

Explain their code and Hudson's reaction to it.

3. Hudson's account of his visit to Buenos Aires reflects his tendency to recall the unusual. Discuss his unusual observations and experiences there.

4. How are the dangers of the city contrasted to those of the country?

5. Hudson occasionally formulates theories to account for animal appearance or behavior. Discuss his theory about the strange black snake and the short-eared owl.

6. Outside events seemingly have little influence on the Hudsons' ranch life. As an exception to this, discuss the account of the revolution.

7. Hudson lived during a time when a naturalist could achieve distinction through original discoveries of species or observations of animal behavior. Can you find evidence of systematic, scientific method in his observation of plants and animals?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare Hudson's animism with the attitudes toward nature in Thomas Traherne's "Shadows in the Water" or Henry Vaughan's "The Retreat."

2. Hudson's responses to nature are complex and multifaceted. Compare his reactions to nature with the ones Wordsworth describes in "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey."

3. Compare Hudson's father and mother, and clarify their influences on his life.

4. Read selected passages from Gilbert White's Natural History and Antiquities of Selbome that record White's observations of birds. How do his observations resemble Hudson's? In what ways do they differ?

5. Study a source that explains Wordsworth's concept of "spots of time," as it is recorded in his long autobiographical poem, The Prelude. Compare these experiences with several from Hudson's early childhood.

6. Hudson admits that he did very little reading that influenced him. Identify the few influential works he lists and give a brief account of the better known ones.

For Further Reference

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Hudson." University of Toronto Quarterly 47 (1978): 304-322. In an extended analysis of Hudson's Nature in Downland, Nicholson clarifies Hudson's perspectives on nature and assesses his relevance to modern ecology.

Ronner, Amy D. W. H. Hudson: The Man, the Novelist, the Naturalist. New York: AMS Press, 1986. Provides a reevaluation of Hudson, centering on his experiences in England, his relationships with contemporaries, and his approach to natural science.

Tomalin, Ruth. W. H. Hudson. New York: Philosophical Library, 1954. Tomalin gives an account of Hudson's life and literary career, quoting extensively from his works.

Related Titles

Those who find Hudson's autobiography appealing will likely enjoy his two best known novels. The Purple Land shares the South American pampas setting, and the descriptions of nature are comparable. While Hudson introduces the same character types who reside in the area, the novel includes romance, suspense, and adventure involving its hero, an Englishman named Richard Lamb. Green Mansions, set in the Venezuelan jungle, poignantly conveys Hudson's childlike sense of wonder in response to nature. The novel recounts the idealistic romantic love of Abel and Rima, an unspoiled girl of the forest.

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