



A FISH CAUGHT IN TIME, THE SEARCH FOR THE COELACANTH

Reviewed by Phil Adds

Samantha Weinberg
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Ex Africa Semper Aliquid Novi*

"Consider now the Coelacanth,
Our only living fossil.." Ogden Nash

The coelacanth, a lobe-finned fish once considered a likely ancestor of the terrestrial tetrapods was known from the fossil record from the Middle Devonian, then disappeared from view in the Cretaceous and was thought to have become extinct. In 1938, in South Africa, a living specimen was caught by chance and came to the attention of the young curator of the East London museum, Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer. Unable to identify it, but realising that it presented unusual features, she was fortunate to be able to call on the expertise of the dour but formidable J.L.B. Smith, chemist and ichthyologist. In these days of instant communication it is difficult to believe that she waited nearly a fortnight for Smith to reply to her letter, difficult also in these more cynical times to imagine the excitement that her find caused. Smith came and whisked the fish away for study, telling his household that in the event of fire, the fish must be the first thing saved.

Samantha Weinberg recounts the story of the fortuitous first discovery of a living coelacanth, and in a chapter that reads like a thriller, the mission to claim the second, caught in the Comoros Islands, and bring it back to South Africa, where it was inspected by the Prime Minister, the Calvinist, white supremacist, creationist Dr. Malan. The book follows the story of the hunt for the home of the

coelacanth and the eventual discovery of a second population in Indonesia; and what a story it is, full of passion, intrigue, political wrangling and tragedy, but above all, love for this most elusive and fascinating creature. If the writing is occasionally more like romantic fiction (telephones ring "shrilly", eyes are "piercing", women are "beautiful but cruel", and a table "groans" with a wedding feast), it remains a wonderful story, and this noble fish is well served by Miss Weinberg, who clearly has a deep love and respect for her subject.

On the debit side, the illustrations are woeful, and, irritatingly, are listed without page numbers; and even allowing for the fact that the author is not a scientist, the spelling mistakes on the time-line on page 29 are unforgivable!

*There is always something new out of Africa. (Pliny).

