



The life of René Malaise: from the wild east to a sunken island

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Abstract

A review is presented of the life of the Swedish entomologist René Malaise (1892–1978), the inventor of the “Malaise trap” and one of the most important 20th Century specialists on sawflies (Hymenoptera: Symphyta).

Key words: Biography, Malaise trap, Insecta, Hymenoptera, Symphyta, East Asia.

Introduction

Malaise is a familiar name to most entomologists, but less well known is the incredible life of the man who invented the effective and now ubiquitous insect trap. More than 30 years have passed since his death, and only a few people have memories of this passionate, humorous and generous man who conducted his various endeavours with such strong conviction. René Malaise (Fig. 1) participated in expeditions to remote locations such as Kamchatka and Burma, where he not only experienced nature in its most marvellous state and made astonishing visits to tribes of indigenous people, but also survived severe earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, as well as close encounters with armed opium smugglers and animals such as bears, wolverines, sables and wolves.

He made large and valuable contributions not only to the insect collection but also to the zoological (including palaeontological), botanical and mineralogical collections at the Swedish Museum of Natural History (NHRS) in Stockholm. His Burma material was one of the single largest contributions to the insect collection. Furthermore, he published important works describing the sawfly fauna of various parts of the world, primarily the far eastern and southeastern Asia. During the later years of his career he tried to prove the reality of Plato’s myth of Atlantis in several papers and books. His reputation in the scientific community suffered greatly because of these idiosyncratic views, which after the 1960’s no longer reflected prevailing thought in mainstream geophysics.

This biographical sketch is based on the following sources:

- Archive material associated with Malaise housed at the Department of Entomology at the NHRS including correspondence, newspaper cuttings, personal documents like CVs and letters, photographs and discussion on Malaise’s publications.
- Protocols of the meetings of the entomological society in Stockholm published in Entomologisk Tidskrift.
- Books by Malaise and his travel companions as well as other publications about Malaise’s life and the material he collected. See full bibliography at the end.

This paper provides a biographical background that is useful in understanding Malaise’s work on Symphyta. Further publications on his scientific work are in progress.