



John Van Denburgh

VAN DENBURGH, John (1872-1924).

As Holbrook's "North American Herpetology" (1842) did for eastern North America, Van Denburgh's *magnum opus*, "The Reptiles of Western North America," in two large volumes (1922), laid the foundation for present-day herpetological studies in the American West. Born of Dutch-English ancestry in San Francisco on 23 August 1872, Van Denburgh showed an early interest in birds and later attended newly-founded Stanford University (A.B. 1894, M.A. 1895, Ph.D. 1897) where his major professor, Charles H. Gilbert, interested him in reptiles. In 1894, he became associated with the California Academy of Sciences as an assistant; he was promoted to curator the next year, a position he held until his death except for a period when he attended medical school (M.D. Johns Hopkins University 1902). In addition to the curatorship, he also had a medical practice in San Francisco. His death in Honolulu, Hawaii, on 24 October 1924, was officially recorded as a suicide.

Van Denburgh's main interests were life histories, distribution, and taxonomy, as exemplified in his first major works, a three-part series on the herpetology of Baja California, Mexico (1895-1896, reprinted 1978), and "Reptiles of the Pacific Coast and Great Basin," issued in 1897 (reprinted 1971). He was an accomplished field naturalist, and also skilled in laboratory technique, as shown in his early studies on the venom of *Heloderma*. He was an avid collection builder and amassed one of the largest

interested in all aspects of ophiology including taxonomy, distribution, mode of life, and anatomy. Once living animals were no longer available to him, he turned to other interests. He died at his home in Bournemouth, Dorset, on 19 May 1950.

Wall published about 215 titles over the period 1898-1928. His first major work, issued in serial form, was "A Popular Treatise on the Common Indian Snakes." This was published in 29 parts, with 28 beautiful colored plates, in the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*, over the period 1905-1919 and, unfortunately, was never reissued in book form. In 1907, the first edition of Wall's widely-used "The Poisonous Terrestrial Snakes of Our British Indian Dominions" was published. This manual for identification and treatment of snake bite went through three more editions (1908, 1913, 1928). Perhaps his book best known to scientists is "Ophidia Taprobanica or the Snakes of Ceylon" (1921). He also published "A Hand List of Snakes of the Indian Empire," in five parts (1923-1925), which was a systematic list with full synonymies.

• *References*: "Colonel Frank Wall," p. 412. In A. Lawrence (ed.), *Who's Who Among Living Authors of Older Nations*, vol. 1. Golden Syndic. Publ. Co., Los Angeles, 1931; "Frank Wall, 1868-1950," by M. Smith, *Copeia*, 1951: 113-114, 1951; "Bibliography of the Herpetological Papers of Frank Wall," by S. M. Campden-Main, *Smithson. Herpetol. Informat. Serv.*, pp. 1-7, 1969. • *Portrait* (1935) and *signature* (1926): British Museum (Nat. Hist.), courtesy A. F. Stimson.



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