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Edward O. Wilson: Ants to Sociobiology

On December 26 of last year, the world of biology lost one of its most distinguished thinkers and authors, a professor for 46 of his 92 years at Harvard University. Professor Edward O. Wilson authored more than 30 books and was awarded, among many other prizes, two Pulitzer Prizes in General Non-fiction, one for "On Human Nature" (1978) and one for "The Ants" (1990). He coauthored the latter with longtime colleague Bert Hölldobler.

He was drawn to insects from his earliest days of observing fire ants in his childhood state of Alabama, becoming so much an expert on ants that he became known as "the ant man." His one book of fiction is "Anthill" (2010). But his contributions to biology extend so far beyond that one specialty, building outward from the behavior of ants to evolutionary biology, Darwinian natural selection, sociobiology, and, as extension of that, human behavior. The path that his curiosity took was truly remarkable, as was the new ground that he broke. He was also known as "Darwin's natural heir."

I relish opportunities to hear world renown authors in person, and I actually did have opportunities to listen to Edward O. Wilson speak in Pittsburgh twice, both hosted by the Rachel Carson Homestead. In 2007 he lectured at the Rachel Carson Centennial Legacy Conference at CMU, and in 2010 at the Rachel Carson Celebration of Biodiversity at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. He and Rachel Carson, she so distinguished for books such as "Silent Spring" (1962) and "The Sea Around Us" (1950), did not really know one another, but they had shared purpose in life.

I count my two opportunities to hear Wilson lecture among other memorable opportunities in my life to hear thinker/writer giants in person including Linus Pauling, Margaret Atwood, Julian Huxley, and Carl Sandburg. "Wow," you say! Yes, say I, "Wow!" In Huxley's case, I was in the first row, at his feet, in awe of this great man of science. My lifelong regret, however, is missing out on the chance to hear Robert Frost read from his own books of poetry when I was just an unappreciative undergraduate at Rutgers University.

But I did not miss out on Edward O. Wilson for either of his visits. In fact there is an interesting family story to tell about that. Within a day of when Wilson lectured in Pittsburgh in 2007, it was my wife's birthday. My surprise birthday gift to her, though it is more appreciated now than it might have been then, was to take her to the lecture. Not exactly a candlelight dinner, but now a wonderful memory for both of us. I even got to speak to Wilson briefly. We still muse over this whole event now, and at a later time we came full circle by visiting the actual Rachel Carson Homestead in Springdale as part of a group. That too was a memorable event in its own way. Her homestead spoke for her.

I sometimes hear people remarking about this or that trip to faraway places as memorable, to which I can certainly relate, but I often find in reading great books, fiction

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or nonfiction, and getting to know their authors, something more memorable, more mind stretching. Edward O. Wilson has been a great trip!

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation
3268 Windgate Drive
Murrysville, PA 15668
(724) 325-1093