

WET LEAVES SPECIAL EDITION



a Series On Books For The Hobbyist

by SUSAN PRIEST

Exotic Aquarium Fishes by Dr. Wm. T. Innes

A Seventy-Two Year Perspective

Part TWO: Review of Editions One, Eight, and Thirteen

The year was 1935. The aquarium hobby in America was youthful and energetic. The aquarists of the day were thirsty. Fortunately for them, as well as generations of aquarists to follow, someone was ready, willing, and able to quench that thirst. His name was William T. Innes, and seventy-two years later his name is still often-spoken, and his writings are still often-read. Although he has a variety of titles to his credit, he is most well known for his authorship of the book Exotic Aquarium Fishes (hereafter referred to by me as “Exotic”).

In part one of this article (the introduction), I mention the most recognizable cover of Exotic. I would like to call your attention to the photo on the facing page, which is a reproduction of “the green leatherette cover with the gold embossed rasboras.” (The title can be found along the spine, on a paper label.) This cover design was used from the first edition (1935) through the nineteenth edition (1957), which was the last edition to be revised by Dr. Innes. Thus, it is a representation of the cover of all three editions of Exotic which are under discussion here.

Start by opening the front cover, and then stop. Don’t even touch any of the pages yet. What do you see? It is a map of the Western Hemisphere. (On the inside of the back cover is a map of the Eastern Hemisphere.) Before you have even turned a single page, Dr. Innes is telling you what he considers to be primary information about tropical fishes. You aren’t ready for the details yet, but he wants you to be mindful of the fact that the habitat location of a given fish will be important to your study of the topic. These maps have numerical as well as alphabetical “margins,” which will guide you as you travel to specific locations. Dr. Innes will be referring you to these maps very often, but we will come back to this later.

As you begin to turn the pages, you will come across a color portrait of a pair of *Rasbora heteromorpha*. This is followed by the title page, which reads Exotic Aquarium Fishes, “a work of

general reference.” Exotic will fit any definition of a textbook that you can come up with, but don’t worry—you will like it anyway!

On pages three and four is the “Author/Publisher’s Introduction” (in this instance, they are both the same person). “Appreciations” are most warmly expressed to Dr. George S. Meyers, as well as for the illuminating comments which were obtained by having parts of the text read to various aquarium societies of the day. (Other people were named as well.)

The “Aquarium Principles” of oxygen, light, temperature, feeding, fish foods, enemies, and diseases are the first topics to come under discussion. Mathematical formulas for calculating the surface area of water needed by different sizes of fish are quite specific. There are directions for constructing a homemade “light strip.” “The light may be just above or in the water, as long as it is not in up to the socket.”

The section on fish foods offers the reader several recipes for making their own prepared foods. “It is difficult to state what the temperamental *scalare* will eat, but they have been found to like scrambled egg.” Much more emphasis is placed on the acquisition and feeding out of live foods, daphnia being deemed to have particular value.

The text, and especially the photos, of the enemies of our beloved fishes, are quite scary. Water tiger, dragon fly larvae, and hydra are the most heinous. In their predatory stages, they are as large or even larger than the fish which they are attacking. The names of the diseases would be familiar to you, with the possible exception of “itch,” which should not be confused with “ich.” There are no photographs in this section. Such diseases as dropsy and fungus infection are described, but not illustrated.

Next comes the broader topic of “General Management.” At this point, Wm. T. covers a wide variety of subjects in no particular order. Examples include green water, covers, nets, seasoning tanks, and tapping on the glass, to name

but a few. He says: "There seems to be about as much sense to tapping an aquarium glass to gain the attention of the fishes as there is in speaking in a loud tone of voice to someone who does not understand our language. The result is the same—fear and confusion."

Exotic includes a section called "Plants and Planting." The first question it asks itself, and then promptly answers, is "why include plants?" They supply an aquarium with oxygenation, purification, and beautification. Many of the plants are illustrated with black-and-white photographs. Advice on how to plant reminds us, among many other points, to keep the plants moist. "A half-drying may set them back for weeks."

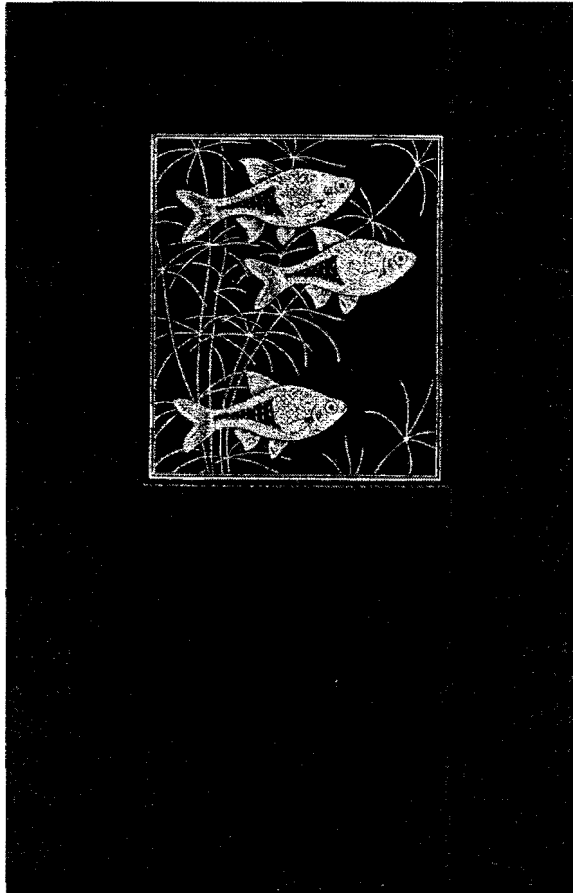
"The pleasure of aquarium study can be doubled by organizing it." This is how Wm. T. prefaces his thoughts on the classification of fishes. This brief chapter describes how the appearance of each fish can help the aquarist place it in the correct family. It includes anatomy diagrams, and a section on the breeding of egg-laying fishes.

Even those of you who have enough interest in a seventy-two year old, out-of-print book to have read this far are getting restless. It's time to clean the glass, both inside and out, so you can get a good long look at the fishes.

Dr Innes treats each fish as an individual. How it might fit into a chart, or a list, or a group of icons is of no interest to him. How a fish presents itself, and what makes it different rather than similar to other fishes is how it is described. I didn't count how many fishes are represented in the first edition, but there are 349 pages full of "finformation."

As our author explains this important point much more clearly than I could, I am going to let him tell you in his own words, quoting from his introduction: "It will be noted that greatly varying amounts of text accompany different fish

illustrations. This is deliberate. Where little is known of a species, or where its habits have just previously been described for another member of the same family, we believe blank paper is better than needless repetition or any literary 'padding.' Those species which are especially interesting or popular, or whose life habits require extra space to describe, receive it."



Here are some excerpts from Exotic's description of one of your all-time favorite fish: "Missionary" fish would be a fitting name for this little beauty, for it far exceeds any other species in the number of convert aquarists it has made. Each male is as individual as a thumb print. Hours can be spent in the pleasant pursuit of trying to disprove that statement. The only result will be added admiration. It is a livebearer. It is unusually active. It will thrive in close confinement. It has an extreme temperature range of 35 degrees, from 65 to 100. It matures rapidly, an important point for those aquarists breeding for definite color patterns. The species

was first introduced to aquarists from Kingston, Jamaica, in 1912. Like rings in a pond, its fame is still spreading."

Have you guessed yet that our hero (oops! I mean our author) is talking about the ubiquitous guppy? The complete text fills over two pages. The scientific name attributed to this fish at that time was *Lebistes reticulatus*.

At this point I would like to quote Dr. Innes on the subject of scientific names; "The best we can say on this point is that 'names do change' in accordance with the progress of ichthyological research. The chief source of confusion has been the hurry and carelessness of some aquarists in clapping any name on a newly imported fish before it has been carefully identified. Later check-up usually shows such names to be erroneous, with consequent aquaristic brain-ache." In any event, Baensch's Aquarium Atlas lists

twelve different scientific synonyms for the fish we all know of as a guppy. In current usage is the name *Poecillia reticulata*.

I will stay with the guppy as an example of how Dr. Innes presents each fish to us. Every fish "biography" is illustrated. Most have black-and-white photographs, but many are color paintings which have often been mistakenly thought to be photographs. Here is a brief quote from the introduction: "The placing of the illustration and the text together in every instance is one of the main features of this book."

Immediately below the illustration is the scientific name. Then comes a (Latin) pronunciation guide, and the common name(s) of the fish. These are followed by the meanings of the words in the Latin name. For example, in the instance of our friend the guppy: *Lebistes*-meaning not known; *reticulatus*-netted. The next item is the geographical location they hail from, followed by the adult length of males and females.

Ultimately, the last entry under each photo is a notation directing the reader to either the Eastern or Western Location Map, and a pair of letter/number references. In the case of the guppies, it says "Western Location map x19 to A24." (Lower case as well as upper case letters have been utilized, and x is not a typographical error, nor is it the same as X.) Then it is a simple matter of turning to the inside front cover and finding the place(s) where they cross. After that, you head right into the text of the "biography" for each fish.

Buried as discretely as a treasure chest within the text about guppies is this sage advice: "Many breeders try to bring the male guppy to a more robust size. This can only be done by continuous rapid growth under the influence of the magic 3 of fish culture-right temperature, plenty of room per fish and plenty of live food." The lesson to be learned here has nothing to do with magic. It is that as you are reading *Exotic*, you must not be a "choosy" reader. Every entry has something to offer, even if one of your favorite fishes is not under discussion.

At this point I am going to jump forward to the eighth edition, which was published in 1947. Early on you will notice a significant addition. On the reverse of the title page there is a photograph of our author, Dr. William T. Innes. The first revision of *Exotic* to contain this photo was the sixth edition. The reason for this addition was a very simple one. His readers requested it. They wanted to see what this highly revered man looked like.

The major difference between the first edition of *Exotic*, and the successive editions, can

be summed up by tallying the number of pages. The first edition has 463 pages, the eighth edition has 507 pages, and the thirteenth edition has 520 pages. The additional pages represent a comparable number of additional fishes under discussion. (As per an earlier entry, we already know that some fishes may have had more space allotted to them than others.) Another, and perhaps even simpler way to observe this population growth is to look at the index of fishes, which noticeably expands with each edition. Occasionally a fish has been removed from the lineup, due to the fact that it is no longer available to aquarists.

A couple of other changes can be noted near the end of the book. The eighth edition, and subsequently the thirteenth, have a couple of pages on marine aquariums. Also, there is a brief section on "community tank combinations." Our author makes numerous disclaimers as to the usefulness of this feature, and presents his suggestions with hesitation. As in the case of including his own likeness, he compiled these lists in response to the requests of his readers.

Here is one final observation. The value our author placed on aquarium societies was evident right from the very beginning. His comments on the subject were brief, but they were italicized in their entirety!

A thorough search of the eighth and thirteenth editions with the proverbial fine-toothed comb, which would turn up the addition of a word here, and the removal of one there, would not contribute anything of substance to this review. The main difficulty in working from the earlier editions is that many, indeed most, of the names of the fishes have been changed.

It seems to me that I have told you too little, as well as too much. Clearly, I couldn't tell you everything. I have tried to choose quotations which will give you a feel for the era, the material at hand, and the man himself. I would like to give you one last quote to ponder until next month. "They sail like swans asleep." What fish do you think Dr. Innes was referring to? I'll tell you which one it is next month in part three of this article, when I will be reviewing editions nineteen, twenty, and twenty one of *Exotic Aquarium Fishes*.

Reference:

Baensch, Hans A. and Riehl, Dr. Rudiger. *Aquarium Atlas* (Volume I), Baensch Publishing, 1991.

