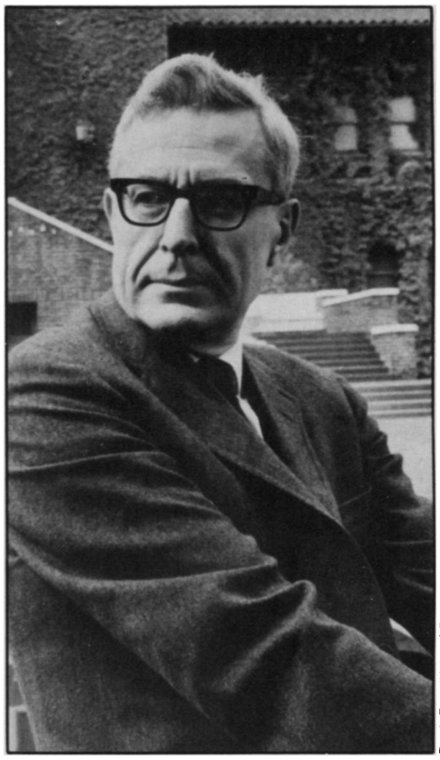
Strange Hours: Eiseley on Eiseley

Loren Eiseley, in the excavation of his own long life, tells how an underdog from Nebraska became a reknowned scientist and respected natural philosopher

BY JANET L. HOPSON



Frank Ross/Univ. of Penn.

Haunted by chance, time, solitude.

Loren Eiseley is an archaeologist by profession—a sifter of bones, broken pottery and the artifacts of buried civilizations. He, like others of his profession, has spent the better part of his lifetime searching such fragments for statements about past cultures. Eiseley, now nearly 70, has set up camp on what he calls the "ruins" of his own, long life, and conducted a search in the form of an autobiography entitled *All the Strange Hours: The Excavation of a Life* (see p. 98).

The title was chosen with the perfection of a scientist; excavation is the perfect word for Eiseley's sifting of self. He carves out incidents, half hidden in the strata of a life's memories, and searches them for a pattern of personal culture. The incidents he presents are somewhat disconnected, in roughly chronological order and relayed with the same mixture of skillful narration and philosophy that Eiseley has employed so successfully in 10 earlier volumes of naturalist essays. His excavation yields a strange assortment of artifacts—funny, curious, tragic: a conversation with a merchant sailor on a New York subway; a story about dancing with an ostrich, about a grade school friend who snubs him, about planting gold crosses over the graves of small birds.

Eiseley still looks at nature with wonder and swings easily into natural philosophy several times in the book. His descriptions, for example, of the Sphex wasp with its instinctive ability to paralyze prey and of the synergy of nerve cells to create human consciousness reexplain his fame as a naturalist writer. But the book is quite different from his previous works, and, moreover, from other autobiographies. It is worth reading as a unique autobiographical form alone, but more so, for a scientific audience, for the insight it gives into how a lonely child from Nebraska becomes a renowned scientist and respected thinker.

"I realize," Eiseley told me in a telephone interview last week, "that there are many people who thought I should have said 'I was born in 1907 in a log cabin by the Platte,' then go painfully, year by year through my life. But I didn't want the book to string off at the end into 'famous hands I have shaken.' I am just an obscure academician" (unnecessary modesty for a distinguished professor of 30 years tenure, one of the most widely read American naturalists and the long-time provost of the University of Pennsylvania) "and as such, I must be careful not to spend long, boring pages detailing my somewhat esoteric successes."

The beginning of the book might jolt readers accustomed to Eiseley the essayist, who, in such popular works as *The Immense Journey* and *The Unexpected Universe*, extolls with poetry and gentle amazement the "mysteries of man and nature." Eiseley, we learn, had a classically unhappy childhood—family quarreling, a deaf mother, in his words, "paranoid, neurotic and unstable," and exile during his long bout with tuberculosis. The bitterness and self-pity in these early recollections is offset only by Eiseley's account of his days as a railroad hobo during the depression. He presents what may be autobiography's most literate record of this life—the trap of joblessness, boredom and danger of death from the crushing wheels of the boxcars.

"Men beat men," a grizzle-faced hobo once told him in a deserted train yard after Eiseley was beaten by a railroad brakeman. "That's all. That's all there is. Remember it kid." And he does. He approaches people, in general, with a degree of sad fatalism. He becomes, in his later years, not surprisingly, a lover of underdogs, and thus many of his excavations center on the weak and the lost—a horned toad, a talking cat, a hungry mongrel, a dying janitor.

"I really don't try in my writing," he told me, "to do any more than just talk to myself." And Eiseley's own archaeological dig is clearly haunted by a preoccupation with time, chance and solitude.

His concern over time is, he says, a professional liability. Archaeologists look for permanence and are often struck with the individual's utter impermanence in the creep of geologic time. And yet man, with his conscious memory, can stop time. Eiseley's "most perfect day" was one in which five hobos on a sunbaked railroad siding talked of lost civilizations and lost themselves in a timeless nirvana.

His preoccupation with chance is born from both his scientific understanding of nature's randomness and his own sense of life's contingency. Eiseley draws the most accurate sketch of himself in old age, his "days of a doubter," in his discussions of chance, gambling, death and potentials. He has left, he writes, "the sharply defined country of youth and scientific certitude," and must acknowledge the absolute control of chance, what he calls "the Other Player" and "the zero." It becomes for him almost a religion: "Behind nothing, before nothing, worship it the zero," he quotes from one of his own unpublished poems. In his last chapter, Eiseley describes a fantastic dream in which he meets the Other Player face to face in a speeding boxcar to gamble over death. "You play but once," the Other Player tells him. "That is why the days are counted."

But just as memory can stop time, Eiseley says, man has the potential to influence chance. "Unlike water," he writes, "we possess a power to flow toward the circumstances that create our final destiny." Eiseley as writer has, in his own way, changed and enriched the views of many toward the world of nature. *All the Strange Hours*, brooding, impressionistic, painfully personal, may well effect change of a different sort. "In what has come to pass," he writes, "it is for the reader to detect his own gambler, himself as fugitive, his own rebellious scholar. In the end it may be he will have discovered personal secrets and in the resulting confusion I will have achieved my purpose and effected once more my own escape." □