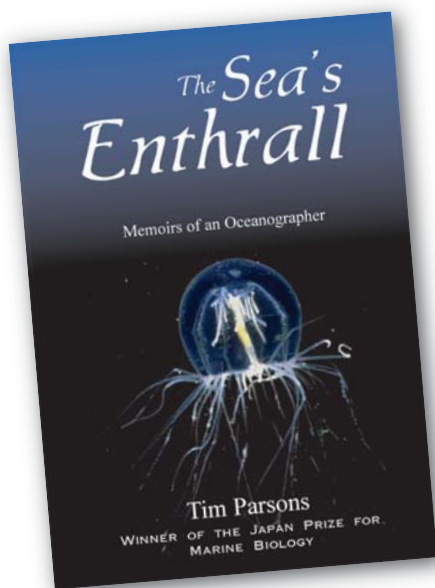


# The Sea's Enthrall

## Memoirs of an Oceanographer

BOOK BY TIMOTHY PARSONS

REVIEWED BY DAVID W. TOWNSEND



Ecce Nova, 2004, 187 pages, ISBN 0-9731648-7-5, paperback: \$19.95

The name Timothy R. Parsons is immediately recognizable to biological oceanographers. Most of us have routinely used one or both of his manuals of sea water analysis (the first published with J.D.H. Strickland in 1965; the second with Y. Maita and C.M. Lalli in 1984), or we used as students (or teachers) the first *bona fide* textbook on biological oceanography, published with M. Takahashi in 1973 (and which also saw later revisions). In nearing the end of a remarkable career, Parsons tells us here, in

simple language and few words, a short story of his life, from his early childhood years in England and Ceylon, up to and including his winning The Japan Prize in 2001. He brings us through his life's landmark events—both personal and professional—and introduces us to his most unforgettable characters, including that special science teacher to whom he credits his pursuing a career in marine science (most of us can relate, I am sure). He shares with us intimate aspects of his personal life and high points in his scientific career, all the while weaving in his political views on the environment.

Having decided that he wanted a career in “something in biology,” Parsons left England for Canada and McGill University where he would study the only field of biology he was aware of at the time—agriculture. His interest in analytical chemistry subsequently led him to pursue his Ph.D. in biochemistry. From McGill, Parsons took his first job in Nanaimo, British Columbia, working under John Strickland at the Pacific Oceanographic Group of the Fisheries Research Board of Canada. Those early years helped to form the scientist

we have come to know today. “Violently seasick and retch[ing] constantly...” on his first oceanographic cruises, Parsons' career would soon take off. Time spent at UNESCO shored up his international perspectives on fisheries and environment-related matters, while exposing him to cultures and political bureaucracies of various nations. Those experiences appear to have served him well when he made his transition to academia, taking a post at the University of British Columbia where he would spend much of the remainder of his career.

Parsons' general views on the philosophy of science surface in several places, and his anecdotal accounts are at times reminiscent of episodes that many of us can recall having experienced at one time or another. In his early attempts to win research grants (e.g., in 1972), he became frustrated with the same pervasive focus held today by many funding agencies: that scientific research must be hypothesis-driven. His views on ocean pollution

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may surprise some readers: he argues for what he feels to be a more even-handed perspective with regard to environmental policies, stressing that we will not “kill the planet,” and indeed, that the ancient ocean was also polluted as a result of greater volcanic activity LONG AGO. No doubt some readers will be taken aback by Parsons’ seeming defense of the harvest of harp seals, and his almost relegating to insignificant the environmental damage caused by oil spills. But no one can accuse Parsons of not speaking his mind. Whether it is his views on fields of oceanographic research (“mud sucks”), or university politics, he lays bare his feelings.

The field of fisheries oceanography became for Parsons almost a passion, and he describes his work to advance the scientific study of fisheries as his most significant. While successful in advancing the field, he did not prevail, ironically, in his attempts to establish an institute at his own university that married fisheries science and oceanography. His limited ability to maneuver in the murky world of university politics would thus represent one of his greatest failures; in frustration, he took early retirement.

Travel, family affairs, and professional consulting now occupy his time. Parsons relates some of these stories to the reader, almost as an afterthought, before he concludes his memoirs by sharing with us his winning the prestigious Japan Prize.

That the book is too short and ~~filled~~ SPOTTED with typographical errors does not detract from Parsons’ having achieved his goal, which, I presume was to reveal who he is and what he believes in. But, I wish he had written more. ☐