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**Loren Corey Eiseley, 1907 - 1977,  
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**BIOGRAPHY**

Biographical note [from the Ring-binder]:

A.M. 1935; Ph.D. 1937; 1947-59 Professor, Chairman and Curator of the Department of Anthropology and History of Science; 1959-61 Provost of the U. of P.; 1961-77 Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and History of Science.

Biographical sketch from the *American National Biography Online*:

**Eiseley, Loren Corey** (3 Sept. 1907-9 July 1977), anthropologist, writer, and philosopher of science was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, the only son of Clyde Edwin Eiseley, an amateur actor turned hardware salesman, and Daisey Corey, a self-educated artist. The family's financial instability and his mother's handicap (she was deaf and, as he later wrote, "always on the brink of mental collapse") made his formative years in Nebraska a time of profound isolation. For solace, he turned to the Nebraska prairie and its fauna. He enrolled in the University of Nebraska in 1925, but physical and psychological crises kept him from graduating until eight years later. Near the end of his life, he recalled dropping out of college at least three times--to work in a poultry hatchery, to recuperate from tuberculosis in Colorado and the Mojave Desert (1928-1929), and to drift, riding the rails in the West (1930-1931). His father's death in 1928 brought Eiseley to the brink of mental collapse. During this period, however, he worked on his first archaeological dig, published his first poetry, and cultivated a deep affinity for animals and

landscape. In the same year he finished college (1933) Eiseley went to the University of Pennsylvania for graduate work in anthropology. He earned his Ph.D. in 1937, completing a dissertation titled "Three Indices of Quaternary Time and Their Bearing upon Pre-History: A Critique." With this work an intensely private man began an unexpected career as a prominent public intellectual and literary naturalist.

Eiseley's distinguished academic career began in the Department of Sociology at the University of Kansas (1937-1944). In 1938 he married Mabel Langdon, former curator of American art collections at the University of Nebraska; they remained married for nearly forty years, deeply committed to a close, though private, partnership. From Kansas the couple moved to Oberlin College (1944-1947), where he was appointed department chairman and professor of anthropology and sociology. Then, in the fall of 1947, Eiseley passed up a grant for research in East African humanoid sites to accept a post at the University of Pennsylvania as chairman of the Department of Anthropology, a position made available by the retirement of his mentor and friend [Frank Speck](#). In 1948 he was appointed "curator of early man" at Penn's University Museum. In 1961, after a two-year term as university provost, he was named the first Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and the History of Science, a position he held until his death.

During his long career he received numerous grants and awards and held important academic posts. In 1949 he was named vice president of the American Anthropological Society; that same year he became the president of the American Institute of Human Paleontology. While researching a book on Darwin, he helped the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia acquire its massive collection of Darwiniana, which is still considered one of the best in the world. During 1961-1962 he worked as a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California. He was subsequently named head of the Department of the History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Pennsylvania (1962-1964). And finally, he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship for writing intellectual autobiography during

1963-1964. In addition to at least thirty scientific articles and professional papers, he published thirteen books during his lifetime; four more have been published posthumously.

The publication of *The Immense Journey* in 1957 was greeted with enthusiasm by literary critics and the popular press, though many of his scientific colleagues were skeptical of "digressions" into personal and philosophical themes, and criticized the book for its lack of scientific rigor. In the following years, Eiseley developed what he called "the concealed essay, in which personal anecdote was allowed gently to bring under observation thoughts of a more purely scientific nature" (*All the Strange Hours*, p. 177). His books, usually compiled from essays, won him growing recognition as a writer. In 1958 he published *Darwin's Century: Evolution and the Men Who Discovered It*, a major study of the history of evolutionary thought that won the Phi Beta Kappa prize for best book in science. In 1960 he adapted a series of lectures into *The Firmament of Time*, which won several prestigious awards, including the John Burroughs Medal for nature writing. *Francis Bacon and the Modern Dilemma* (1962) expressed an important shift in Eiseley's thinking on science and epistemology. Having struggled for years with the reductionist assumptions and implications of contemporary science, he was increasingly drawn to the figure of Bacon, whom he regarded as a model of the visionary scientist--an individual less concerned with the techniques of research than with its goals and the ethics by which it should be guided. Such considerations were central to two subsequent books, *The Unexpected Universe* (1969) and *The Invisible Pyramid* (1970). In the latter he considers the space program as an example of modern technology's attempt to transcend human limits without the necessary spiritual insight.

During the final years of his life Eiseley increasingly turned his attention inward. He published *Notes of an Alchemist* (1972) and *The Innocent Assassins* (1973), two volumes of poetry that combined new work with older verse written years earlier for the journals *Prairie Schooner*, *Midland*, *Voices*, and *Poetry*. In the two final prose works published before his death, *The Night Country* (1971) and *All the Strange Hours* (1975), Eiseley turned to deeply personal themes of the prairie landscape of his youth and his own search for a place in his broader home,

the cosmos. Eiseley's autobiographical impulse found its fullest expression in *All the Strange Hours*, which biographers Gerber and McFadden hail as a "masterpiece of autobiography." In this work, archeological excavation becomes a metaphor for personal discovery: instead of layers of sediment, the inner explorer digs through layers of memory, piecing shards of meaning into a coherent story. The book's composite, nonlinear narrative embodies the complex process of personal excavation. Though all of Eiseley's work is noteworthy for its fidelity to scientific fact, it is the mysteriousness of his landscapes--the surrealist terrain of "The Innocent Fox," e.g., where "we grope in a lawless and smoky realm toward an exit that eludes us" (*Unexpected Universe*, p. 195)--as well as his ability to weave scientific fact, personal anecdote, and philosophical reflection together that distinguishes his work and continues to draw both scholarly and popular attention.

One of the delights--as well as one of the difficulties--of assessing Loren Eiseley's significance stems from his influence in such a wide range of human inquiry. As Peter Heidtmann points out in *Loren Eiseley: A Modern Ishmael*, "only the volumes of his poetry are classified by the Library of Congress system under 'P' (for literature). Otherwise, one discovers, the rest of his books are catalogued under 'B' (for philosophy and religion), 'C' (for history), 'G' (for geography and anthropology), 'Q' (for science), and 'R' (for medicine)" (Heidtmann, p. 5). It is a mistake to think of Eiseley as simply a popularizer of science. Instead, while he has enormous respect for the external world, he approaches it in an avowedly subjective manner. "[H]ere is a bit of my personal universe," he says in his very first book, *The Immense Journey*, "a universe traversed in a long and uncompleted journey" (p. 13). During the next twenty years that journey is recorded in a variety of books, works in which Eiseley moves ever further from his training as a scientist, and closer to a personal world of psychological, intellectual, and ethical struggle. His legacy of compassion, intelligence, and affirmation in an uncertain world, is perhaps best summarized at the conclusion of "The Star Thrower": "[F]rom Darwin's tangled bank of unceasing struggle, selfishness, and death, had arisen, incomprehensibly, the thrower who loved not man, but life" (*The Unexpected Universe*, p. 91).