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First of all, we have to say that Pierre Le Roux’s ambition is to make the diversity of Yersin’s work better known to the general public, not to an audience of historians of science. As Le Roux reminds us in his introduction, Yersin was not only a medical doctor and a Pasteurian, but also an agronomist, an ethnographer, a meteorologist, and so on, in other words, a chameleon, as the book title suggests. The author proposes comparing Yersin’s work with the work of some other French scientists whose originality was due to their multidisciplinary training and approach. Le Roux is an ethnologist and, to illustrate this comparison, he has chosen figures he knows well, such as Jean Boulbet, Georges Dumézil, André-Georges Haudricourt and André Leroi-Gourhan. Like Le Roux, part of their field-work was located in Asia, for some of them in Southeast Asia, a possible point of comparison with Yersin, who made Vietnam his land of choice. Is this the reason why the greater part of the introduction is devoted to background material about these scientists? Does their work, for example, overlap with Yersin’s? Indeed, after having mentioned that he is trying to clear up some obscure aspects of Yersin’s life, the author suggests he will accomplish this by using a “history of science approach”.

Nevertheless, from chapter 1, entitled “The Pastorian”, it is clear that Le Roux does not use this method. In this very short chapter, we find little information on the beginning of Yersin’s medical career, or on his entrance into the Pasteurian world. His information comes from existing biographies, and we may wonder whether the author consulted any archival sources at all, in particular those of the Pasteur Institute, which contain a voluminous correspondence written by Yersin, to which, curiously, Le Roux alludes. Based on this correspondence, he could, for example, have verified what he calls the “legend” of Yersin’s encounter with Louis Pasteur and Emile Roux. Eventually, thanks to a half-page footnote we learn much more about Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza than we do about Yersin. The second chapter, devoted to “the explorer”, is better documented. Unfortunately, it opens with assumptions—concerning Yersin’s political network that allowed him to get leave from the *Messageries maritimes*—which again show the lack of archival work. However, in this chapter one can congratulate the
author for arousing the curiosity of readers interested in the history of colonization, or in the history of a discipline long linked to it, that is ethnology. Indeed, Yersin was the first to explore a region of Central Vietnam, in the middle Donnai, although, as Le Roux notes, he only “grazed its borders”. Later on, several attempts to penetrate the region were undertaken by Henri Maître, and much later Jean Boulbet. However, Le Roux supplies very little material on this long history of “pacification”. On the other hand, he carries on with digressions, such as excessively long footnotes that are often inopportune, while bibliographic citations are sometimes either lacking or the author simply refers to a “personal communication” dating from 2004. The same problem reappears in the next chapter, which is devoted to the general history of plague and the history of the discovery of its causative bacillus. However, even a non-specialist in the history of medicine could have easily found more appropriate references for this subject! Here we also find some odd assertions, such as one about the search for germs in the blood which the author says was “in use” at this time (1894). Finally, although chapter 4 concerns agronomy, the discipline in which Yersin was most interested in after microbiology, Le Roux devotes only three pages to it.

The two next chapters, entitled “The Chameleon” and “The Indomitable one”, endeavour to describe Yersin more closely. In the first of these, we learn that his name is linked to the creation of the mountain resort Dalat. Unfortunately, the reader quickly gets lost, because a succession of figures is evoked whose links with the development of Dalat are not well explained. At the end we can understand, or rather guess, that this is how the author wished to approach the question of Yersin’s relationship with political and financial powers in the colony. But Le Roux does not shed much light on this point. And while the management of the Pasteur Institutes in Indochina is well described as an enterprise involving several actors, one of them being the colonial government, their final structure is not clearly announced. Finally, to justify the title of the chapter, two pages are dedicated to Yersin’s other hobbies which were not mentioned earlier: Cinchona plantations, astronomy, meteorology, cars …

Some topics are treated too briefly. The contempt Yersin had for honours and the present day worship of his memory in Vietnam (the two topics in chapter 6) merit more than two pages. The final chapter is as surprising as the former ones. Praise is brutally followed by a sort of devaluation: Le Roux grants that Yersin was a clever man, and one might find him friendly. But, he continues, his talents, at least as an explorer, cannot be pitted against the “genius” of a scientist such as Henri Maître when he wrote of the highlands of Central Indochina.

The biggest merit of this short book is without doubt that it reprints one of the accounts of a Yersin exploration. Regrettably, this text was not used in the rest of book, either to shed light on Yersin as a man or in relation to the history of colonisation and the role played by scientists in it.