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Moths, Myths, and Mosquitoes: The Eccentric Life of Harrison G. Dyar, Jr.

Marc Epstein

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On September 26, 1924, the ground collapsed beneath a truck in a back alley in Washington, D.C., revealing a mysterious underground labyrinth. In spite of wild speculations, the tunnel was not the work of German spies, but rather an aging, eccentric Smithsonian scientist named Harrison Gray Dyar, Jr. While Dyar's covert tunneling habits may seem far-fetched, they were merely one of many oddities in Dyar's unbelievable life.

For the first time, insect biosystematist Marc E. Epstein presents a complete account of Dyar's life story. Dyar, one of the most influential biologists of the twentieth century, focused his entomological career on building natural classifications of various groups of insects. His revolutionary approach to taxonomy, which examined both larval and adult stages of insects, brought about major changes in the scientific community's understanding of natural relationships and insect systematics. He was also the father of what came to be known as Dyar's Law, a pragmatic method to standardize information on insect larval stages as they grow. Over the course of his illustrious career at the U.S. National Museum, Smithsonian Institution from 1897-1929, Dyar named over 3,000 species, established the "List of North American Lepidoptera," an unrivaled catalog of moths and butterflies, and built one of the nation's premier lepidoptera and mosquito collections.

However, Dyar's scientific accomplishments are a mere component of this remarkable biography. Epstein offers an account of Dyar's complicated personal life, from his feuds with fellow entomologists to the scandalous revelation that he was married to two wives at the same time. Epstein also chronicles Dyar's exploration of the Baha'i faith, his extensive travels, his innumerable works of unpublished fiction, and the loss of his wealth from bad investments. Comprehensive and engaging, *Moths, Myths, and Mosquitoes* will delight entomologists and historians alike, as well as anyone interested in exploring the zany life of one of America's virtually unknown scientific geniuses.

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