

A Sheltered Life – The Unexpected History of the Giant Tortoise by Paul Chambers. John Murray 2004.

If you thought that a book on Giant Tortoises could only be of interest to the most rabid chelonophiles you will be quickly disabused within a few pages of starting A Sheltered Life.

In this fascinating, detailed but pacy book, Paul Chambers investigates the history of these extraordinary reptiles, the puzzle of their origins and geographical distribution, the role they played in Darwin's theory of evolution, and the ghastly and tragic story of their interaction with mankind, as a result of which many of the species alive in the 16th century have become extinct.

Giant Tortoises have never left people stone-cold, and have often become an obsession, not least for the 19th century reptile specialist Albert Günther of the British Museum and Walter Rothschild, the multi-millionaire maverick zoologist who tried to save the giant tortoises by buying everyone he could lay his hands on! To these two men, Gunther especially, the species owes a great deal for publicising their plight and promoting their protection. A Sheltered Life also contains the intricate detective story of Harriet, a giant tortoise who may or may not have belonged to Darwin.

As a keeper of two MUCH smaller tortoises I loved this book, and was left wondering where I could see the giants closer to home than the Galapagos islands!

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh