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Commentary

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BRITISH CONSERVATIONISTS AND MUSEUM SCIENTISTS

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The penultimate paragraph of David Steadman's (2001) review of *Pigeons and Doves* by Gibbs et al. (2001) contains so entirely unprovoked and so cheerfully uninformed an attack on me that I hope you will understand why I feel obliged to respond. Having spent the prior paragraph complaining, good-naturedly but with good reason, about the book's failure to cite his own work, and having then quoted the authors' acknowledgment of my editing, Steadman (2001) promptly remarks that "British conservationists are aware of, and their work benefits from, my and other overlooked research… but they are disinclined to cite it because we are evil museum scientists who occasionally collect birds." The explicit use of my name (which otherwise serves no purpose), the link to a particular benefit (how many other British conservationists are concerned with the areas in which Steadman works?), and the fact that the authors of *Pigeons and Doves* are not, by profession, conservationists, leaves it entirely unambiguous that it is I personally who am the target in that sentence.

I am identified as a British conservationist who disapproves of scientific collecting. It is here that I find myself most in sympathy with Steadman over the matter of having one's writings neglected, because, ironically (the defence of a single, highly unusual instance of noncollecting [Collar 1999] notwithstanding) I am probably the only British conservationist in recent decades to have upheld the importance of scientific collecting in a paper dedicated to the subject in an international journal (Collar 2000). Documenting threatened birds has led me to work extensively on museum collections of birds, all of them carefully attributed to source, such that BirdLife's Red Data Books are probably a better advertisement for the value of museums to conservation than any other books produced on either side of the Atlantic in the past two decades. Moreover, at a 1999 conference in Britain's Natural History Museum (of which I am a Scientific Associate, and hence I suppose close to being an evil museum scientist myself). I presented a paper (Collar and Rudyanto 2003) summarizing the importance of museums in threatened species documentation and intended as an expression of my and my institution's gratitude for the generosity and support I have invariably received from Steadman's many colleagues in the course of my researches.

Steadman (2001) then takes a smack at British bird books for a "holier than thou" attitude, and reminds us, in a sardonic ellipsis, that the United States is now an independent nation. His implication seems to be that a deliberate disregard for the work of American museum scientists is somehow endemic to the entire British publishing tradition. I can only plead for a more lenient construction, since that tradition rests on and is largely sustained by the enthusiasm of purely amateur ornithologists, and it is thus both blessed and blighted by their strengths and shortcomings, one of the latter being lack of access to decent academic libraries where the great body of American ornithological work is available. There are, as we all know, two main theories of history, the cock-up and the conspiracy, but assuredly only one of them applies to bird books—and it is not the one Steadman is propounding. (Incidentally, the authors of *Pigeons and Doves* make a clear and immediate acknowledgement of the debt they owe to museums in facilitating the research they undertook for the book—so they, at least,

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are not attempting to be holier-than-thou about museum collections.)

Enough already! David Steadman has always been most helpful to BirdLife International whenever we have contacted him, and as we increasingly focus on the Pacific in the next few years, he may yet rue the zeal with which we pursue him for information. But I must make a plea for more light and less heat in the way museum scientists, particularly it seems in the United States, may now or in the future make off-the-cuff (and in this case off-the-wall) public remarks about conservationists, particularly in Britain and particularly, I suppose, me. At any rate, I cannot but think that if Steadman's aim when he goes collecting is as badly awry as it is when he makes such remarks, his museum must be filling up very slowly!

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