

A Passion for Birds/American Ornithology after Audubon

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BOOK REVIEWS

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A Passion for Birds/American Ornithology after Audubon.—Mark V. Barrow, Jr. 1998. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. x + 326 pp., 33 text figures. ISBN 0-691-04402-3. \$20.95 (Reprint edition, paper).

Bird study began with Aristotle, so it is one of the oldest branches of zoology. Long pursued as natural history, it evolved during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries into the science of ornithology, one of the first and most important fields to graduate into a science. This book carries the history forward by showing how ornithology in the United States arose from a popular interest in natural history and collecting to become a discipline and a profession during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.

The author is a historian of science, not an ornithologist, and he won the Forum for the History of Science in America Prize for this book. He brings the advantages of approaching his subject with the methodology of a historian and the dispassionate view of an outsider. His interest lies in the discipline of ornithology, not its subject matter. Accordingly, he examines peoples' careers and their interactions with regard to their roles in the development of ornithological organizations (chiefly the American Ornithologists' Union) and institutions. He is not concerned with their scientific questions, findings, and ideas. Barrow does not seem to grasp why people like to watch and study birds or what it is they are after. Despite its title, his book does not convey its subjects' passion for birds except as specimens for a collection.

A central theme is the rise of a divergence within the ornithological community between professionals and amateurs, and the relationship between them. Barrow is intrigued by the scientists' efforts to distinguish and distance themselves from collectors, taxidermists, natural history dealers, birdwatchers, conservationists, and others, while yet depending on them for observations, specimens, and money.

Barrow begins by tracing the growth of interest in natural history and collecting natural history specimens in the late 1860s. There soon developed ornithological collections and expansive collecting networks that had scientific ornithologists at their center and a variety of collectors on their periphery. A conflict arose between the scientists, who wanted specimens for the production of knowledge and the much larger number of collectors for whom the collection itself was often an end. Barrow discusses several factors that promoted bird collecting during this period, including sport hunting and the publication of identification guides and collecting manuals. Although he mentions

the current interest in the geographical distribution of birds and the new appreciation of variation initiated by Darwin's *Origin of Species*, he does not explain how they stimulated the growth of serial collections.

Ornithology in America during the latter half of the nineteenth century was chiefly concerned with the systematics of North American birds. Both the Nuttall Club and the AOU were founded in order to deal with controversies over nomenclature. Barrow recounts these histories and shows that in addressing these problems, the scientists who established the AOU also sought to further their disciplinary and professional aspirations. They attempted to control the organization through a two-tiered membership structure, which quickly met resistance from the broader ornithological community. Struggles ensued over the AOU's membership structure and other issues, both within the Union and between its members and outsiders.

Disputes arose over two major nomenclatural issues, the production of a single, authoritative list of North American birds and a campaign for the formal recognition of subspecies. Barrow shuns the technical aspects of systematics and examines how these controversies shaped the AOU and affected the relationship between scientists and the larger ornithological community.

The book then turns to the rise of the bird protection movement in the U.S. during the late nineteenth century, in particular the AOU's involvement in wildlife conservation initiatives. "The AOU never resolved the fundamental tension between its commitment to bird protection and its repeated assertions of the right to collect even obviously threatened species. . . . Because of this and other conflicts, the AOU's commitment to bird protection was marked by periods of intense activism punctuated by periods of retrenchment" (p. 7). Both the AOU's bird protection committee and the Audubon movement fluctuated over several decades. Barrow shows how efforts by several individuals and movements in bird conservation and science eventually led the AOU to realize in 1937 "that even scientific collecting had legitimate limits" (p. 153).

Bird protection was supported by the growth of popular interest in birding starting about the beginning of the twentieth century. Barrow traces the rise of that movement and its consequences. He discusses the controversy over the publication of sight records, although he does not seem to understand why they were rejected by scientists. Viewing the problem as part of the larger issue of the professional–amateur relationship, he concludes that scientists perceived independently published sight records as a threat to their authority. Barrow tells of the early evolution of field guides and their

reciprocal influence on birding. Although he mentions several times Roger Tory Peterson's "legendary" field guide, first published in 1933, he never considers why it caught on or its important aftereffects. The early history of the Wilson Ornithological Club and *The Wilson Bulletin* are described in detail, but other societies and their journals are ignored. Barrow also covers the establishment of the Christmas Count movement, the Biological Survey's programs in migration and in bird banding, and the rise of life-history studies. His interest is chiefly in how these activities were enabled by observations from a network of birders. They revived the old dilemma that professionals needed the help of amateurs for large-scale censuses and studies, yet wanted to dictate how the observations should be made.

The history closes with an examination of how the AOU, *The Auk*, and American ornithology in general were revitalized in the 1930s. These efforts began with Joseph Grinnell and were pushed forward by Herbert Friedmann and especially Ernst Mayr. Barrow explains how the latter two worked "to broaden the focus of ornithology, raise the standards of research, and instill the AOU with a stronger professional consciousness" (p. 8). His attention is on their careers and their influence on other ornithologists, not their scientific contributions. He discusses the growth of university training and the shift to new research areas as additional factors bringing about changes in ornithology. The story ends about 1940, by which time Barrow feels the AOU and American ornithology as a whole had reached a new level of professionalism. Developments in the past half-century are passed over except for the work of Charles Broley and Crawford Greenewalt in the 1950s and 1960s, showing that amateurs were still contributing to the science.

This is fascinating stuff because it explains how ornithology in America came to be as it is today, a history that is largely unknown even to senior members of the AOU. Readers who know of past masters through their scientific work will be surprised to learn that they were also influential in shaping the organization and professionalism of the field. Likewise, the book reveals (unintentionally) the long ancestry of several issues that are still with us, for example, collecting permits, nomenclature, and AOU involvement in conservation.

Barrow tells his story with blow-by-blow narratives of interactions between individuals or organizations, chiefly the AOU and its officers. He often quotes from books and letters of the period and relies on the statements of other historians, but seldom gives his own opinion or interpretation. A wealth of detail makes for a very thorough treatment, while anecdotes add color and human interest. In places, however, the facts are excessive, causing the reader to lose sight of the forest for looking at the leaves. Everything is documented with copious notes at the back of the book; in double columns and small print, they occupy 56 pages vs. 211 pages of text.

The author has well accomplished what he set out to do. Other books treat many of the same movements, events, and individuals in regard to nature study, bird-watching, bird protection, or ornithological institu-

tions. None of them, however, match the present book in explaining how ornithology in this country evolved as a professional discipline and its relationships with the larger community of bird enthusiasts.

Still, Barrow's approach is intensive but limited in time and geography. He hardly mentions the development of ornithology in Canada or Europe, surely influential here, or what has happened in the U.S. during the past fifty years. Regrettably, he is not interested in the science itself, and he doesn't seem to understand the scientific side of some of the issues. He discusses various ornithologists with regard to their roles in the AOU and the profession, not their scientific contributions. For example, Robert W. Shufeldt's marital problems and the AOU's subsequent reaction to him (in seeking to define itself as a scientific rather than a social organization) get several pages, while his publications on avian anatomy and paleontology are barely noted. Similarly, Herbert Friedmann gets much more attention than Alexander Wetmore, a far more productive scientist.

A comprehensive history of North American ornithology has yet to be written. Until then, students and established ornithologists will find here the best account of their origins.—PETER STETTENHEIM, 168 Croydon Turnpike, Plainfield, NH 03781, e-mail: peter.stettenheim@valley.net