

REVIEW

The History of Ornithology

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This is the UK edition of a book published in French in 2007. There is also an American edition: *All about birds: a short illustrated history of ornithology*. This subtitle is a much better reflection of the book than its UK title. It falls far short of being *the* history of ornithology, but it is certainly *a* history, and the illustrations are its most distinctive feature. The fact that it was originally published in French is significant, since it was presumably intended to fill a gap in the French literature which was less marked in the English literature.

As in most histories, the sequence of chapters is chronological, starting with Antiquity and tracing the study of birds through the Middle Ages ('A long winter for science'), the Renaissance, followed by a chapter on each of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Inevitably, the chapters are uneven in length and detail, given that so much more is known about some periods than others. Antiquity and The Middle Ages receive only 6 pages each, while the 18th and 19th centuries are given 39 and 91 pages, respectively. The chapter on the 20th century, the period of which most readers of this book will have had first-hand experience, is disappointingly brief, focusing on the first half of that century. Why did the author not bring the story up to date? Was the sheer wealth of more recent material simply too overwhelming?

The richest and most interesting chapters are those on the 18th and 19th centuries, respectively glossed as 'the birth' and 'the golden age' of ornithology. They consist mainly of short biographies of key figures in the development of bird study. We read of the importance of 'cabinets of curiosities', private collections, often huge, of exotic fauna and other objects, in driving research. We are told of the arguments over taxonomy, and we learn something of the relationships and personalities that produced the knowledge which modern birders take for granted.

From these chapters I learned things that made me want to know more, like the extent to which early ornithology depended on the 3 'ms' – medics, missionaries and the military. It seems that virtually all biologists in the 18th and 19th centuries underwent medical training, perhaps because this was the only available way of learning how bodies work – interesting that this connection between

humanity and animality was made in practice long before Darwin provided its scientific rationale.

The level of self-sacrifice was often astounding, perhaps the saddest cases being the Dutch medical graduates sent in the early 19th century to gather specimens from the colonies. Many died in their 20's and 30's due to the harsh living conditions. Contrast this with the life of Brian Houghton Hodgson (pp. 114-116) who, in his youth, 'suffered from fever and an affliction of the liver'. He defied medical predictions of 'likely death' if he did not return to England, and spent much of his life in Tibet and Nepal, eventually living to the age of 94.

New Zealand readers will be interested in the story of Buller's fraudulent owl, which he offered for a large sum to Lord Rothschild in 1904 (p. 162). Buffon's wonderful description of 'the hummingbird' ('The stone and metals polished by the art of man are not comparable to these jewels of nature') is delightfully anthropomorphic: 'impatience seems to characterize their spirit: if they approach a flower and find it to be wilted, they remove its petals with haste characterizing their scorn' (p. 74).

But there is no doubt that the illustrations are the book's most impressive feature. They include some by acknowledged masters such as Audubon, Gould and Lear, but some of the best are by unknown Indian artists, commissioned by British colonial ornithologists for their own publications. It is not just the birds that are illustrated. Many of the short biographies are accompanied by small portraits of their subjects, providing, effectively, a history of portraiture and of male fashion (all but one of the subjects are male) as well as of knowledge. Once again, the chapter on the 20th century is a disappointment, as here the illustrations of birds and of people seem to dry up.

In summary, the book has good and bad points. It does little more than skim the surface of ornithology through the centuries, but in doing so it provides a useful introduction. The choice of words is quirky in places, no doubt as a result of having been translated from French, and there are some careless typographical errors. The bibliography is disappointingly short and does not include the many historical publications referred to in the text. Are none of them available in modern editions? Despite its shortcomings, this book is probably worth buying. For the serious historian of ornithology it will never be more than a starting point, but for the 'ordinary' birder who wants to know a little about the history of their passion, it is a useful and enlightening read.

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